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**Return to the Countryside: An Ethnographic Study
of Young In-migrants Remaking Rural Japan**

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Abstract

Japan is facing a demographic crisis marked by a rapidly aging and shrinking population. Japan's rural areas—particularly remote islands and villages in the periphery—have experienced decades of out-migration, with some predicted to disappear entirely. Yet, the discourse on counterurbanization has been gaining attention over the past decade. While counterurbanization is unlikely to reverse rural population decline, the growing interest in rural living among younger generations has contributed to the emergence of a movement known as *den-en kaiki* (Return to the Countryside).

This thesis analyzes the *den-en kaiki* movement on the ground by studying the lived experiences of young rural in-migrants in their 20s to 40s who have chosen to move to rural areas after spending most of their lives in cities. Drawing on 15 months of ethnographic fieldwork conducted across a group of islands in the Seto Inland Sea, including 62 interviews, the study examines how in-migrants construct alternative lifestyles by bringing new ideas, skills, and forms of capital to the countryside. Central to this process is the transformation of their living environments as seen through the renovation and reuse of *akiya* (vacant houses).

The findings show that Japan's *den-en kaiki* movement is driven by a diverse group whose mobilities are experimental, provisional, and motivated by a search for autonomy, purpose, and ways of living “beyond growth.” Shaped by broader socioeconomic precarity and generational value shifts, their movements are often nonlinear, not limited to permanent settlement, and include those belonging to the *kankei jinkō* (relationship population). Young in-migrants also actively reshape rural spaces through everyday practices of repair, reuse, and DIY renovation, transforming *akiya* into small businesses and communal hubs. These grassroots forms of placemaking rely on reciprocity, volunteer labor, and alternative economies of exchange rather than profit, fostering new forms of commons and community participation. By conceptualizing in-migrants as placemakers who view vacant space as a spatial resource, the thesis demonstrates how socio-spatial transformations contribute to a remaking of rurality. Together, these findings offer insight into emerging postgrowth futures and new possibilities for rural revitalization in contemporary Japan.

Keywords: rural revitalization, rural mobilities, placemaking, postgrowth, vacant houses

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Contents

Abstract.....	ii
Acknowledgments	iii
Publications.....	iv
List of figures	ix
List of abbreviations	xi
Glossary of key Japanese terms	xii
Chapter 1: Introduction	0
1.1 Encountering rural Japan.....	0
1.2 Research aims and questions	5
1.3 Conceptual framework	6
1.4 Research methodology	8
1.5 Thesis structure.....	12
Chapter 2: Literature review	14
2.1 Rural revitalization	14
2.1.1 Decline and shrinkage.....	14
2.1.2 Japan's rural areas.....	15
2.1.3 Policies and laws on depopulated regions	17
2.1.4 Critiques of rural revitalization.....	19
2.1.5 Toward alternative forms of revitalization	21
2.2 Rural mobilities	23
2.2.1 Beyond counterurbanization	23
2.2.2 Japan's return to the countryside movement	25
2.2.3 Policies aimed at rural in-migration	29
2.2.4 Renewed interest in rural living.....	30
2.2.5 Diverse relationships with rural areas.....	33

2.3 <i>Machizukuri</i> and placemaking.....	34
2.3.1 The vacant house problem	35
2.3.2 Policy and local responses to vacant houses.....	38
2.3.3 Challenges in using vacant houses	39
2.3.4 The rise in renovation and DIY	41
2.4 Chapter summary	43
Chapter 3: Research set-up	45
3.1 Project background.....	45
3.2 The field site	48
3.3 Finding and following networks.....	50
3.4 Doing ethnography	52
3.5 Positionality.....	54
3.6 Chapter summary	55
Chapter 4: Return to the countryside	57
4.1 The contemporary <i>hyakushō</i>	59
4.1.1 Tokyo office worker turned organic farmer	59
4.1.2 Part-time English teacher, part-time farmer	61
4.1.3 Redefining the <i>hyakushō</i> in the twenty-first century	62
4.2 The “good life” or an escape from the city?.....	64
4.2.1 Highly educated but unsure of the future	65
4.2.2 Fresh start after dropping out of urban life	67
4.2.3 Life as a NEET on a remote island	68
4.2.4 Taking refuge in the countryside	70
4.3 Young return migrants.....	71
4.3.1 The mission to revitalize one’s hometown	73
4.3.2 Sense of crisis as a motivation to return	74
4.4 The relationship population.....	77

4.4.1 Repeat visitors through a local guesthouse.....	77
4.4.2 Dual residences and start-ups in the countryside.....	79
4.4.3 Rethinking mobilities through <i>kankei jinkō</i>	80
4.5 Chapter Summary.....	81
Chapter 5: Entrepreneurs in the countryside	85
5.1 A tale of two cafés.....	86
5.1.1 Creating a comfortable place for my hometown	86
5.1.2 A hidden box for self-expression.....	89
5.2 Chasing self-sufficiency	92
5.2.1 Fashion designer balancing work and life	92
5.2.2 Sailing for fun and self-reliance	96
5.3 Resilience in times of crisis.....	98
5.3.1 Doing business during a pandemic	98
5.3.2 Small and mobile bakery	101
5.3.3 Entrepreneurship in the postpandemic age	104
5.4 Rural areas as places of opportunity.....	106
5.5 Chapter summary	110
Chapter 6: Renovating the countryside	112
6.1 The paradox of vacant houses	113
6.2 Young in-migrants and vacant house renovation	114
6.3 The vacant house renovation movement in Onomichi.....	119
6.3.1 NPO Onomichi Vacant House Renovation Project.....	119
6.3.2 The Onomichi Labyrinth House	123
6.4 Party Architecture and the 0-Yen House.....	130
6.5 Chapter summary	137
Chapter 7: Learning from the countryside.....	139
7.1 Students in rural Japan	140

7.1.1 The Tane Project by MIT and Keio University	140
7.1.2 The Koshirakura Landscape Workshop.....	142
7.1.3 The Red Dot School in Sagishima.....	144
7.2 Japan Studio at the University of Melbourne	145
7.3 Exhibition and questionnaire results	148
7.3.1 What do residents think about a Michi-no-Eki?	149
7.3.2 Comments on design proposals	150
7.3.3 Rethinking <i>machizukuri</i>	152
7.3.4 Encouraging local innovation	155
7.4 Chapter summary	157
Chapter 8: Conclusion	159
8.1 Rethinking counterurbanization and rural mobilities	160
8.2 Rethinking placemaking in the periphery	162
8.3 Contributions to the field.....	164
8.3.1 Expanding conceptions of counterurbanization.....	164
8.3.2 Rural in-migrants as placemakers.....	164
8.3.3 Methodological and educational innovation.....	165
8.3.4 Toward a model of postgrowth governance	166
8.4 Future research	167
8.5 Final remarks	169
References	171
Appendices	192
Appendix A: Interview table	192
Appendix B: Sample interview	198
Appendix C: Copy of exhibition questionnaire.....	208
Appendix D: Exhibition questionnaire results	210

List of figures

Figure 1.1. Thesis structure.....	12
Figure 2.1. Categories of rural in-migrant mobilities in Japan, illustrating I-turn, U-turn, and J-turn, the main groups included in this study.	28
Figure 2.2. The number of inquiries, consultations and seminars held by NPO Hometown Return Support Centre in Tokyo, 2008–2024.	31
Figure 2.3. Change in age of users who inquired and attended consultations or seminars held by NPO Hometown Return Support Centre in Tokyo.	32
Figure 2.4. Change in the number of vacant houses nationwide (1978–2023).	37
Figure 3.1. A citrus storage shed that has been renovated into a small café. Photo by author, November 11, 2019.	46
Figure 3.2. Map of field site capturing towns and islands part of the study.	49
Figure 4.1. A tiny <i>daikon</i> foraged on the beach (left), and Mai foraging for edible weeds on the beach (right). Photo by author, January 26, 2021.	58
Figure 4.2. Mai’s <i>hatake</i> , which is based on natural farming methods (left), compared to a typical local <i>hatake</i> (right). Photo by author, January 26, 2021.	59
Figure 4.3. Livelihood of interviewees.	82
Figure 5.1. Interior of Sato’s newly renovated café. Photo by author, February 5, 2022.	90
Figure 5.2. Saori’s shop and atelier with old wooden floorboards sourced online for a vintage look (left). One of the rental spaces for other in-migrants used as a shop (right). Photo by author, March 27, 2021.	93
Figure 5.3. Wild boar cooking workshop at Saori’s atelier and residence, the ground floor has an open kitchen often hosting events. Photo by author, October 28, 2021.	94
Figure 5.4. The house and bakery sit by an empty lot that Fumiko rents to use for customers and island gatherings. Photo by author, March 14, 2021.	101
Figure 5.5. Mobile bakery with custom made shelves at the back of car. Photo by author, February 10, 2021.	103
Figure 5.5. Motivation of interviewees behind their decision to relocate.	108
Figure 6.1. Interviewees and <i>akiya</i> renovation.	115

Figure 6.2. Motivation, livelihood, and <i>akiya</i> categories of interviewees.	116
Figure 6.3. Gaudi House. Photo by author, February 19, 2022.	120
Figure 6.4. Kitamura Shoten. Photo by author, November 10, 2022.....	122
Figure 6.5. The entrance to Onomichi Labyrinth House on the day of the flea market and open house tour. Photo by author, April 3, 2021.	124
Figure 6.6. Belongings from the house, which have been sorted and left out for people to take for free. Photo by author, March 13, 2022.	125
Figure 6.7. Plan drawing showing the first phase of construction, 2021. Courtesy of Yu.	126
Figure 6.8. Screen shots of Facebook messenger chat where members voted for the pattern to lay wooden tiles at the entrance.	127
Figure 6.9. Timeline of renovation workshops from 2019 - 2025.	129
Figure 6.10. Timeline of events and activities from 2019 - 2025.	129
Figure 6.11. The 0-Yen House. Photo by author, October 30, 2021.	132
Figure 6.12. Hand-drawn plan of 0-Yen House, 2021. Courtesy of Shotaro.....	134
Figure 6.13. Salvaged wooden boards reused as flooring material. Photo by author, October 5, 2021.....	134
Figure 6.14. Salvaged bamboo lattice from demolished walls repurposed into lamp shade. Photo by author, December 15, 2021.....	135
Figure 6.15. Performance at 0-Yen House featuring live cooking, dancing, music and painting gathering in-migrants, locals and visitors. Photo by author, October 30, 2021.....	135
Figure 7.1. The <i>akiya</i> given to KobLab students to renovate and use as a base to stay in Tane. Photo by author, May 5, 2019.....	141
Figure 7.2. Second floor of the <i>akiya</i> renovated by students over the years showing newly plastered walls. Photo by author, May 3, 2019.	142
Figure 7.3. Using a vacant school gym on Sagishima as a workshop space to learn traditional carpentry, hosted by the Red Dot School. Photo by author, Jan 17, 2024.....	144
Figure 7.4. The first exhibition of the Michi-no-Eki project, held at a public community facility on Yuge island. Photo by author, July 24, 2021.....	149

List of abbreviations

AA	Architectural Association School of Architecture
Aki-P	Onomichi Akiya Saisei Purojekuto
COKT	Chiiki Okoshi Kyōryokutai
DIY	do-it-yourself
IPSS	National Institute of Population and Social Security Research
JA	Japanese Agricultural Cooperative
Kaso Act	Kaso Chiiki Taisaku Kinkyū Sochi Hō
MIC	Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications
MIT	Massachusetts Institute of Technology
MLIT	Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism
NEET	not in education, employment, or training
NPO	nonprofit organization
NPO Law	Law to Promote Specified Non-profit Activities
OVOP	One Village, One Product
Resort Law	Law for the Development of Comprehensive Resort Areas
Vacant House Law	Vacant Houses Special Measures Law
WWOOF	Worldwide Opportunities on Organic Farms

Glossary of key Japanese terms

<i>akichi</i>	vacant land
<i>akiya</i>	vacant houses
<i>akiya bank</i>	a database that lists information on vacant houses
<i>akiya mondai</i>	vacant house problem
<i>ba-zukuri</i>	Japanese concept of placemaking, focusing on creating specific places (e.g., facilities, spaces) for a community
Chiiki Okoshi Kyōryokutai (COKT)	Regional Revitalization Cooperators (program)
<i>chiiki-zukuri</i>	Japanese concept of placemaking, referring to activities and initiatives to revitalize a region, often referring to community development in rural areas
<i>den-en kaiki</i>	Return to the Countryside (movement)
<i>doken kokka</i>	construction state
<i>furusato</i>	hometown
Furusato Sōseijigyō	Hometown Creation Project
<i>genkai shūraku</i>	marginal village

<i>hakemono</i>	construction of buildings that were bland box-like “things”
<i>han-nō, han-X</i>	half-farmer, half-X
<i>hatake</i>	field for growing crops
<i>hyakushō</i>	farmer/peasant
<i>ijū</i>	in-migration (domestic migration) of newcomers, primarily of I-turners
<i>ijū-sha</i>	(domestic) in-migrants
Inaka de Hatarakitai	We Want to Work in the Countryside! (program)
<i>ishokujū</i>	clothing, food, and shelter
<i>isson ippin undō</i>	One Village, One Product (OVOP) movement
Jiba Sangyō Shinkō Jigyō	Regional Industry Promotion Projects
<i>kankei jinkō</i>	relationship population
<i>kominka</i>	farmhouse
<i>kōryū jinkō</i>	exchange population
Kaso Chiiki Taisaku Kinkyū Sochi Hō	Act on Emergency Measures for Depopulated Areas “
<i>machizukuri</i>	Japanese concept of placemaking referring to activities and initiatives by

	residents to revitalize a town in urban or rural contexts
<i>mirai zukuri</i>	planning and building the future
<i>mura okoshi undō</i>	Village Revival movement
renovation <i>machizukuri</i>	<i>machizukuri</i> practices that involve renovation of buildings and spaces
<i>ritō</i>	remote islands
Ritō Shinkō-hō	Remote Island Development Act
<i>shōmetsu kanōsei toshi</i>	municipalities at risk of vanishing
<i>shōtengai</i>	shopping street
<i>teijū jinkō</i>	permanent population
<i>tomodachi keizai</i>	friend economy
<i>toshi keikaku</i>	city planning
<i>washi</i>	handcrafted paper
<i>zōyo keizai</i>	gift economy

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Encountering rural Japan

One of my first ventures into the Japanese countryside was when I was a master's student studying architecture. I was in Japan in the summer of 2013, undertaking an internship in the center of Tokyo. During one long weekend, I traveled with a group of friends to see some buildings designed by the well-known Japanese architect Tadao Ando on a small island called Naoshima in Kagawa Prefecture. After nearly a whole day of travel that involved riding the bullet train, transferring to a local train, and catching a ferry, we finally arrived on the island. The second edition of a large-scale art festival called the Setouchi Triennale was being held on Naoshima and several other nearby islands. Launched for the first time in 2010, the festival runs every three years. The third edition in 2019 attracted over 1 million visitors from Japan and overseas, which is considerable compared to the small population of the islands—Naoshima, for example, has around 3,000 residents, and another island, Inujima, has only 36 residents with an average age of nearly 80, as of 2020. The islands are classified as a “marginal village” (*genkai shūraku*), which refers to any village where more than half of the inhabitants are 65 years or older (A. Ono 2005). These severely depopulating and aging villages are seen to be at risk of disappearing in the future because of the lack of younger residents to sustain vital community functions (Masuda and Declining Population Issue Study Group 2014).

This initial visit to rural Japan allowed me to see the “hollowing out” of villages firsthand and deepened my interest in rural areas. The widening gap between urban and rural areas had become apparent since the latter half of the 1950s, largely owing to mass rural-to-urban migration (Kakiuchi and Hasegawa 1979). The Setouchi Triennale was an attempt to revitalize the region by bringing artists, volunteers, visitors, and other resources to the islands. The festival featured an array of art projects and sculptures, as well as large-scale museums and galleries designed by famous architects. There were also some small-scale interventions, such as the Art House Projects, where artists transformed formerly vacant houses into artworks dotted along old residential streets.

While walking through an old village on my first trip to these islands, I noticed several vacant and dilapidated houses that were falling apart and overgrown with greenery. Next to these were buildings that appeared to have been renovated and transformed into small shops, galleries, cafés, and guesthouses. In contrast to the art projects of the Setouchi Triennale, these small independent businesses seemed to indicate another form of revitalization at the local level. The novelist Banana Yoshimoto (n.d.) aptly described such business as “signs of life” in an essay written in 2020:

Over the years, under increased foreign pressure, smaller businesses and independent shops have gradually disappeared from Japan. The situation is so grave it defies imagination. It’s like waiting for a heart to stop. Luckily, human beings are as stubborn as weeds, and there are signs of life, however sparse, popping up around the countryside. This is why the present moment is so full of curiosity about country life. The country is the only place where possibilities remain.

In 2019, I found myself returning to these islands for the third edition of the Setouchi Triennale and observed more signs of life. On the small island of Ogijima, which has a population of under 150, an old wooden house has been renovated into a children’s library. The project was instigated by a woman who had moved to the island with her husband and daughter in 2014. Her husband is originally from Ogijima but moved to the nearest big city, Osaka, to study at a university. Some 40 years ago, when her husband was a child, Ogijima’s population had been around 400. On a visit to Ogijima for the 2013 Setouchi Triennale, the family sensed the crisis faced by the island, where schools had closed owing to the lack of children. Soon after, the family decided to move to the island with strong motivation to help revitalize it. They became in-migrants¹, and one of their first missions was lobbying to reopen the schools on the island for their children to attend. Their efforts paid off. The schools reopened, and soon other in-migrants including young families started to move to Ogijima. Around 40 in-migrants now live there, making up about one-third of the total island population. Ogijima Library was opened after the couple successfully crowdfunded over 1.5 million yen.² It is a free, private library that is not only for children but also for welcoming

1 In this thesis, in-migrants refer to individuals who move into rural areas from other parts of Japan. Unless otherwise specified, the term in-migrant should be understood to mean rural in-migrant.

2 For the library website, see <https://ogijima-library.or.jp/>.

potential in-migrants who are interested in moving to Ogijima. They can obtain information and meet other residents at the library, which has become a local gathering spot. The couple is continuing their efforts to revitalize Ogijima—their latest project to transform a 120-year-old post office building into a co-working and accommodation space raised 3.6 million yen through crowdfunding, supported by 231 people.³

Such signs of life were also evident on other islands outside of the art festival. On the island of Ōshima in Ehime Prefecture (part of the region that eventually became my field site), a young couple renovated an old house into a bookstore and café. Both were in-migrants who spent years in Tokyo working part-time jobs. The wife told me she recently completed the government-funded Chiiki Okoshi Kyōryokutai (COKT) program, translated as the “Regional Revitalization Cooperators” program. The COKT program supports people from urban areas to move to rural areas for 1–3 years to engage in various activities aimed at rural revitalization. According to the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications (MIC 2024a), the number of participants has increased since the program was first introduced in 2009 from 89 people from 31 municipalities to 7,200 people from 1,164 municipalities in 2023. COKT participants are generally paid between 140,000 yen and 210,000 yen a month, which suggests that the main motivation for participation is noneconomic.

What has led to such cases where people choose to move to rural areas intentionally, with many going on further to invest in and renovate dilapidated vacant houses? The choice to do so is questionable from a financial perspective. There are fewer jobs in rural areas and most vacant houses are in inconvenient, depopulating areas and thus have little to no market value. Yet despite this, there are still people like the young couple in Ehime who are willing to invest their time, money, and efforts to move to such remote places and renovate a vacant house in the countryside. I became particularly interested in cases where young in-migrants would adapt and reuse vacant houses to create new programs and places for the community. When I asked the couple from Ehime why they chose to open a bookstore and café, they said that there were currently no such places in the village they had moved to. They wished to create a “third place” for the community. A third place refers to a place that is not one’s home or work where people can socialize and interact with others (Oldenburg and Brissett 1982).

3 Crowdfunding campaign page for the project: <https://readyfor.jp/projects/re-ogijima>

The wife thought that such third places were lacking in rural areas in general and wished there was a place where newcomers like herself and long-term residents could interact:

I run the bookstore now but feel there are still not enough places to enjoy culture, such as music here. I feel that it is necessary to have a mechanism to connect the history and culture of the island to the next generation. I want the island to become a diverse society where both islands and newcomers can live comfortably.

As I visited more places, I encountered more examples of former city dwellers who have traded urban life for rural living. In the town of Kamiyama, a small mountain town in Tokushima Prefecture, several old vacant houses were renovated into IT offices attracting young people to move into the town while keeping their jobs. There was also an artist-in-residence program hosting international artists. While visiting Kamiyama, I met a lady who runs the Airbnb I stayed in and learned she was an “I-turner,”⁴ a term used to describe someone who is not from the area but has made a “turn” to move to the chosen rural area as an in-migrant and now lives there as a resident. Having worked a well-paid but demanding job in Tokyo, she told me she decided to move to Kamiyama to start a new life after feeling disillusioned with the competitiveness of urban society and its obsession with money. This dissatisfaction with work became a recurring reason given to me by in-migrants as to why they chose to move out of the city.

Like several others who had moved to Kamiyama, the lady had quit her job at a reputable company and decided to pursue entrepreneurship by starting her own business. She had renovated an old shop on one of the shopping streets into a restaurant on the ground floor and the Airbnb at the rear. During my visit, she told me about her dream to build a sauna in the woods with her own hands using the trees in the mountains. A year later, I saw on social media that she had really done it and was now offering the sauna to her Airbnb guests. Kamiyama is now a well-known town in Japan for attracting creative in-migrants with an approach called “creative depopulation.” A local nonprofit organization (NPO), Green Valley, was instrumental in providing support to the new in-migrants. Shinya Ominami, a key figure in Kamiyama’s revitalization and native of Kamijima who returned after some time

4 In-migrant categories include I-turner (urban residents relocating to a rural area with no prior ties), U-turners (people returning to their rural hometown after living elsewhere), and J-turners (individuals returning to the same region or prefecture but settling in a different rural locality).

abroad, described creative depopulation as “the reality of depopulation; not trying to change it in absolute numbers but in its content. Aiming for a balanced, sustainable, local community, that reduces its dependence on farming by attracting young, creative, talented people from outside to create a healthy population composition” (as cited in M. Yoshimoto 2017). Kamiyama realized the potential of in-migration from young creatives such as artists, architects, and IT workers, as they attract other young entrepreneurs to the town who see Kamiyama as an attractive place to live in (M. Yoshimoto 2017).

This renewed interest in the countryside (*den-en*) has been described as the *den-en kaiki* (Return to the Countryside) movement. What is different about this new trend of counterurbanization is the large proportion of young people—defined in this thesis as those in their 20s to 40s—who are becoming more interested in rural living. Their preferred destination is precisely rural areas with lower population density (Y. Ishikawa 2020). A survey conducted by the Cabinet Office (2014) on public opinion on rural villages found that 31.6% of urban dwellers expressed an interest in moving to rural areas in 2014, an increase from 20.6% in 2005. Using census data, a research report on *den-en kaiki* found that although the number of people moving from urban areas to depopulated regions has not changed significantly from 2000 to 2015, certain regions did experience an increase in rural in-migrants, including those that were seen as unfavorable in the past, such as remote islands and mountain villages (MIC 2018). Out of those who did make the move, the report identified that the largest group was the younger generation, with those in their 20s and 30s accounting for approximately 45% (MIC 2018).

The growing interest in *den-en kaiki* as a social phenomenon has been used to challenge previous predictions that rural areas will disappear (Odagiri 2015). Events such as the 2008 global financial crisis (GFC) and the 2011 Great East Japan Earthquake have been cited as major turning points that triggered a shift in people’s values and became a catalyst for people to explore alternatives to conventional urban life (Klien 2015). The 2020 COVID-19 pandemic has further prompted young people to reconsider their lifestyle and life choices (Mao et al. 2024). The *den-en kaiki* movement suggests a change in mentality among Japanese young people who are starting to view the countryside as an attractive place to live, where there can be opportunities if you look hard enough. The vast number of vacant houses, known as *akiya* in Japanese, is one example of such an opportunity. As of 2023, the number of *akiya*, is estimated to be over 9 million, which accounts for nearly 14% of the total number

of dwellings in Japan (MIC 2024b). While many *akiya* remain abandoned and dilapidated, there are increasing cases of individuals and collectives repairing and renovating them. How they do so and the potential for the renovation process to contribute to community revitalization as a form of participatory placemaking remains an under-studied area in current literature.

1.2 Research aims and questions

This thesis examines the *den-en kaiki* phenomenon on the ground. I aim to uncover who the young rural in-migrants part of this movement are and how they are crafting an alternative way of life in the countryside. In addition, I explore how their activities such as *akiya* renovation are *remaking* rural space, which unveils new placemaking practices in the context of postgrowth Japan. The term “remake” references the work of Michael Woods (2010, 265), whose chapter titled “Re-making the Rural” describes how rural spaces are “being remade as multi-authored, multi-faceted and co-constituted space.” Woods (2010, 16) reminds us that the rural has always been elusive and “does not describe a hard, fast and indisputable material object, but rather refers to a loose set of ideas and associations that have developed over time, and which are debated and contested.” Other scholars such as Abrams et al. (2012) use the phrase “re-creating the rural” to describe the environmental transformations due to amenity migration, confirming the role in-migrants play in reshaping rural landscapes in line with their ideals and expectations.

Woods (2010) goes on to assert that the idea of the rural is an elusive concept that is continuously produced and reproduced. In line with this thinking of rural areas as places that are continuously remade and reimagined, I aim to uncover how young in-migrants are reasserting their identity through two key aspects: their way of life, and how they shape their living environment. To do so, I link counterurbanization and placemaking to address the *social* and *spatial* changes occurring in the countryside to offer a multi-disciplinary perspective on rural revitalization. While placemaking has been traditionally a key focus within the discipline of spatial planning, it is increasingly positioned as a social process (Akbar and Edelenbos 2021). I focus on both the social and spatial aspects of placemaking by conceptualizing young rural in-migrants as active placemakers who are continuously reconstructing, reshaping, and ultimately remaking the idea of rurality in the postgrowth era. To understand the remaking process, the main research questions are as follows:

1. Who are the young in-migrants and why are they choosing to live in shrinking communities?
2. How are young in-migrants reshaping and transforming rural spaces through the process of vacant house renovation?

An additional aim of the thesis is to develop a method to engage with rural communities through design education. Drawing on my background and training as an architect, I taught design studio classes (called Japan Studio) to architectural students from the University of Melbourne for the duration of my doctoral research from 2020 to 2025, including when I was conducting in-person fieldwork from 2021 to 2022 (teaching was done online during the fieldwork because of the COVID-19 pandemic). Using the islands in my fieldwork as testing grounds, students worked on proposing design interventions that would rethink the future of island communities. Scholars have noted the need to reconceptualize new forms of counterurbanization in Japan to reflect contemporary mobilities that are more fluid and hybrid in nature (Dilley et al. 2024). These include the rise of a group of people termed the *kankei jinkō* (relationship population), that is, individuals who are not registered rural residents but have developed a connection with a particular rural community beyond that of the usual tourist (Inoue et al. 2022). I explore the possibilities for myself and my students to become part of the *kankei jinkō* through Japan Studio as a collaborative design project to offer a model for participatory placemaking.

1.3 Conceptual framework

The conceptual framing of the thesis adopts a postgrowth lens to analyze the following related concepts of interest: rurality, rural mobility, revitalization, and placemaking. The continued decline of rural areas, depopulation, and shrinkage has led to diverse efforts and activities under the banner of rural revitalization. These range from pro-migration initiatives by local municipalities to attract newcomers to the building of new infrastructure and other physical upgrades. While the term “revitalization” is often used to describe the various policies and strategies to combat decline and shrinkage, it can be misleading because it is unlikely for a population turnaround (Dilley et al. 2024; Matanle and Rausch 2011). Recent literature on rural Japan has noted the need to rethink existing concepts such as revitalization and counterurbanization (Dilley et al. 2022; Ganseforth and Jentzsch 2021; Manzenreiter et al. 2020; Teraoka 2020; Traphagan 2020). Matanle and Rausch (2011, 437) suggest that the goal for revitalization is not population recovery but to learn to live “beyond growth”:

Perhaps, it is now time for urban communities to listen to the residents of rural areas who have lived for decades with depopulation and who themselves are learning to embrace shrinkage by thinking and living “beyond growth”; perhaps it is time to turn toward new ways of living rooted not in outmoded and rigid doctrines of maintaining permanent expansion but rather in notions of stability and sustainability.

There is a need to reconceptualize the notion of revitalization itself to acknowledge, accept, and plan for a postgrowth society. Postgrowth, and related concepts like degrowth, critique relentless economic growth and advocate for alternatives to growth-based development that prioritize ecological and social sustainability (Banerjee et al. 2021; Kallis et al. 2022; Schneider et al. 2010). In contemporary Japan, where population and economic revival may not be possible, there is a need to explore these alternative approaches beyond growth (Daly 2014; Matanle and Sato 2010; Thelen 2022). For example, Matanle (2017) proposed the concept of a “depopulation dividend,” which contends that there are positive benefits from depopulation such as the possibility of living more environmentally sustainable lifestyles in line with postgrowth values.

The Japanese scholar Kōhei Saitō published on the topic of degrowth in his 2020 book titled *Hitoshinsei no shihonron* (Capital in the Anthropocene). The book sold over half a million copies, and an English translation, *Slow Down: The Degrowth Manifesto*, was published in 2024. Saitō discusses the concept of degrowth and argues for a post-capitalist economy where people can still maintain a high quality of life and social wellbeing while living within planetary boundaries by slowing production and sharing wealth. Saitō believes that economic decline is not a bad thing for Japan but should be seen as an opportunity to live more sustainably. While not all migrants are motivated to live more sustainably in the countryside, the limited resources in rural areas encourage more creative use of what is available and an opportunity to experiment with alternative lifestyles outside the capitalist paradigm. Degrowth scholars have noted the need to acknowledge the interconnectedness of urban and rural areas and critique that there has been little engagement with the spatial implications of degrowth (Varvarousis et al. 2024). The study of in-migrants in rural Japan can thus offer insight into postgrowth socio-spatial imaginaries.

To rethink the concept of revitalization and rurality in a postgrowth era, the concept of placemaking, which encompasses both social and spatial dimensions, can provide a useful framework. Existing revitalization efforts are largely top-down driven, giving rise to potential

tensions between local needs and outsider-led efforts. Citizen-led initiatives have been seen to be more promising in addressing place-specific issues. In Japan, the term *machizukuri* is often used to describe citizen-led placemaking practices. Though vague and broad in definition, it aspires to a type of community design that prioritizes participatory and inclusive models of placemaking, where “residents by their own means must work together with experts to discover the essence of their shared places and community” (Sato 2020, 74). In the field of architecture and planning, *machizukuri* has been linked with the practice of renovation, and renovation *machizukuri* refers to the reuse of existing buildings and resources to create new value (Baba et al. 2016; Ji 2022; Ji and Imai 2022). Other related concepts include *ba-zukuri*, where *ba* directly translates to “place” but refers to more than the physical environment to include the people who gather to form a community.

The placemaking practices carried out by rural in-migrants offer valuable insights into the spatial dimensions of degrowth in a rural context. Scholars have highlighted the need to study rural transformations that decouple human prosperity and economic growth, contending that depopulation and abandonment are driven by “global capitalist accumulation and growth extraction trends founded on subjugating the rural to the urban by creating more operational landscapes and sacrifice zones” (Varvarousis et al. 2024, 8). The 2019 Oslo Architecture Triennale *Enough: The Architecture of Degrowth* explored this issue and emphasized the need to investigate alternatives in the built environment that are not purely shaped by capital but prioritize “human and ecological flourishing” (Dalziel and Olsen 2020). These alternatives may include local, small-scale, and participatory alternatives that aim to reduce the consumption of energy and resources to achieve social and environmental sustainability. While most case studies to date have focused on urban contexts, rural Japan presents a valuable opportunity to explore degrowth from a rural and a non-Western perspective.

1.4 Research methodology

After visiting several rural communities to search for a suitable site for my research, I decided to settle on a small island in Ehime Prefecture in early 2021 to commence 15 months of in-person fieldwork. The choice for the site was a combination of following networks and the rising popularity of the area in attracting young in-migrants in recent years. The mild climate, island landscape, and laid-back atmosphere have attracted not only lifestyle migrants but also a steady number of government-funded Chiiki Okoshi Kyōryokutai (COKT) participants, among others. Though I resided on what is considered a remote island, it is part

of a larger group of islands in the Shimanami area, which allowed me to expand my networks and meet a larger number of people. For this study, I will refer to the field site as “the islands,” as I was able to visit over 10 islands throughout the fieldwork (see Chapter 3 for map of islands included in the study). The islands are also near the town of Onomichi, which is well known in Japan for its citizen-led *akiya* renovation movement. I was able to join several *akiya* renovation projects and expand my fieldwork to building sites, including projects in Onomichi and the surrounding islands.

To summarize, the islands were selected as field sites for the following reasons:

1. The islands are experiencing depopulation such as the closing of schools, and the decline of agriculture and local industries, similar to other typical rural areas
2. In addition to tourism, the islands in the area are actively promoting in-migration, and there is a sizeable group of young in-migrants in their 20s to 40s who have moved to the islands in the last 10 years
3. There is public transport, including buses and ferries, which allow ease of travel both within the island and to the surrounding islands and towns around it
4. The availability of an affordable guesthouse for the duration of my study - the guesthouse is also run by in-migrants which provides an entry into the community
5. The supportive and friendly community who were interested in my study, which included members of the town hall staff and the mayor

Soon after arriving, I was offered the role of a “helper” at a local guesthouse, where I helped with daily chores in exchange for food and board. The guesthouse was managed by two in-migrants, who helped me expand my network by introducing me to their friends, including other in-migrants. I visited the homes and businesses operated by in-migrants including bakeries, cafés, shops, and farms. I actively sought out events they were hosting and supported their businesses where possible by attending various workshops and classes, visiting markets, and participating in other activities they organized. Many of these events were advertised on Instagram and Facebook. I was able to meet most of my interlocutors directly from these activities and maintained contact via social media. To expand my network further, I used social media to contact potential interlocutors directly to set up meetings after establishing contact.

Fifteen months in the field allowed me sufficient time to get to know my interlocutors and build trust. I was able to visit people and sites over an extended period and often more than once. Most existing literature on rural in-migrants focuses on the background of individuals and why they choose to move rather than getting to know how they live afterward and the activities they perform (Reiher 2020). My goal was to not only understand who the in-migrants are but also how they are constructing a life in the countryside and shaping their physical living environment. This required me to limit myself to a manageable geographical area where I could make repeat visits to sites of interest, including renovation sites transforming *akiya*.

Once I had settled in, I actively sought out cases of *akiya* renovation in the area. I visited examples of completed projects and asked those involved about their experiences in acquiring and renovating *akiya*. Through word of mouth and social media, I found cases of *akiya* renovations still in progress. Out of the renovation sites I visited, one project in Onomichi, the Onomichi Labyrinth House, proved to be the most accessible as it actively invited volunteers to help with the construction every month. I was able to visit this project nearly every month over the course of 15 months. I continued my ethnographic fieldwork on several other building sites and volunteered my time to help with renovation works. During rest times, including breaks and meals, I was able to meet the people behind the projects including owners, designers, students, craftspeople, and other volunteers. Conversing with and interviewing them allowed me to understand the challenges and motivations behind the projects to gain a deeper understanding of the social networks present at each site.

Participant observation was useful in gaining insight into the everyday lives of my interlocutors on a general level. I supplemented participant observation with 62 semi-structured interviews (Appendix A: Interview table) to gain more in-depth insight into the background of my interlocutors and other topics of interest or to clarify any questions I had during our interactions. As my Japanese was limited at the start of the fieldwork, I asked for permission to record the interviews and had help from student assistants who interpreted in the first few interviews. Interviews were then transcribed and translated by myself using online translation sites such as google translate and DeepL (Appendix B: Sample interview). As my Japanese progressed, I was able to conduct interviews in Japanese by myself after becoming familiar with frequently used questions and phrases. I benefited from the help of

several in-migrants who had a good command of English and would sometimes accompany me to interviews to assist with interpretation or clarify certain terminology afterward.

To analyze and interpret the data from 15 months of fieldwork and 62 interviews, I adopt a hybrid approach combining narrative and thematic analysis with ethnography. Riessman's (2008) argument that narratives do not "speak for themselves" guided me to conduct thematic narrative analysis by organizing narratives around key themes that emerged across the interviews. I then selected narratives and vignettes as illustrative cases to show how these themes are lived and experienced, while preserving the integrity, sequence, and contextual depth of each individual story. They do not represent the entire dataset but are presented because they most clearly and richly exemplify the thematic patterns identified across the full range of interviews. To support the identification of broader patterns and tendencies of all 62 interviewees, I also developed charts mapping key themes such as motivations, livelihoods, and uses of *akiya*.

Alongside this narrative interpretation, my analysis was grounded in sensory and participatory ethnography, drawing on Pink's (2015) framing of ethnography as an embodied and multisensorial practice. I was not only an observer but learned through shared experiences by actively participating in the everyday lives and environments of my interlocutors. I spent time with them at their home and workplaces, shared meals, attended community and social events together, and joined renovation projects, often staying on-site for several days taking part in cooking, chores, and communal activities. Through these immersive experiences, I was able to interpret interview accounts not only in terms of what my interlocutors said but through how their narratives played out in practice. Insights from Cresswell (2006), Massey (2005), and Ingold (2013) further shaped my analysis of how young in-migrants' narratives are intertwined with movement, making, and everyday spatial practices. Renovation work, for example, was understood not only as a physical intervention but as a relational process through which people actively shape, and are shaped by, their environments (Ingold 2013).

The last component of my research was to develop a method to engage with rural communities through design education. I taught two semester-long (12 weeks) design studio courses (Japan Studio) to Master of Architecture students from the University of Melbourne online while undertaking in-person fieldwork. I worked with students on design proposals to envision future projects for the islands in my study area. These included the design of a

Michi-no-Eki, a “roadside station” that the town of Kamijima is hoping to build in the future. We consulted the town staff and residents on their needs and aspirations for this future project and offered ideas in the form of speculative student projects. Exhibitions were held to showcase the student designs, where I collected feedback from the community through in-person conversations and a written questionnaire (Appendix C: Exhibition questionnaire). The results of the questionnaire and the exhibition materials were presented back to the town to give back to the community. I also held a public presentation of my research on Yuge (an island part of Kamijima) at the end of the fieldwork to island residents to share preliminary findings.

1.5 Thesis structure

This first chapter introduces the premise of the thesis including the research aims, conceptual framework, research methodology and thesis structure (Figure 1.1).

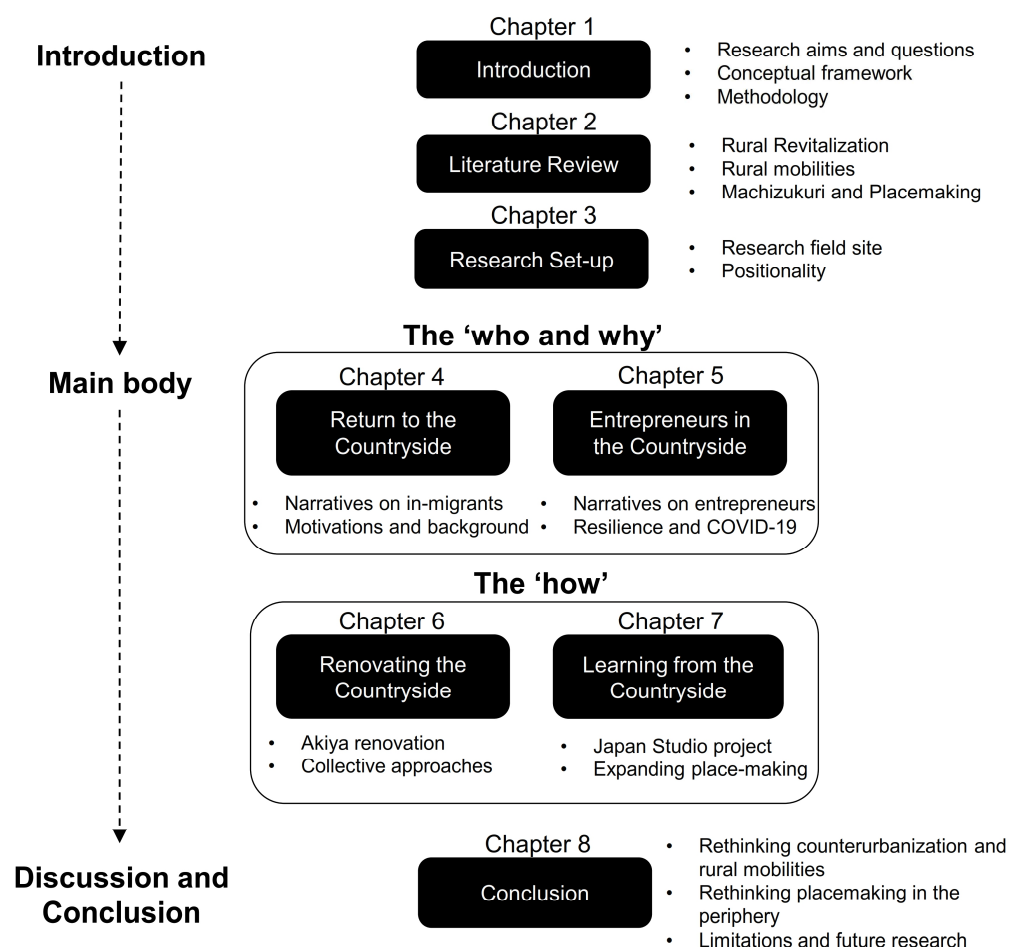


Figure 1.1. Thesis structure.

The rest of the thesis is structured as follows.

Chapter 2 reviews the existing literature on rural revitalization, rural mobilities, and placemaking to situate the research within the broader discourse and identify research gaps.

Chapter 3 outlines the research set-up and introduces the field site.

Chapter 4 presents narratives on in-migrants contributing to the existing literature on rural mobilities. The cases reveal the various forms of mobilities present in the countryside that expand beyond traditional definitions of counterurbanization and lifestyle migration.

Chapter 5 presents narratives on in-migrants who have become entrepreneurs, their motivations and the challenges they face. This chapter also includes my observations of how they navigated times of crisis including the COVID-19 pandemic which was unfolding during the time of my fieldwork.

Chapter 6 focuses on socio-spatial transformations and uncovers the process of *akiya* renovation. I present findings drawn from my experience as a volunteer on building sites and discuss how *akiya* renovation projects are tangible examples of postgrowth architecture and placemaking.

Chapter 7 further delves into the social-spatial aspects of placemaking at a larger scale by introducing Japan Studio, a design studio subject I taught online while undertaking fieldwork. The studio is an ongoing experimental model that expands placemaking activities to include overseas students as members of the relationship population in dialogue with residents. Results from the public exhibition and accompanying questionnaire are discussed to understand island residents' thoughts and concerns when considering the future of the town.

Finally, Chapter 8 is both a discussion and conclusion. It summarizes key findings and contributions, proposes directions for further research and offers final remarks to end.

Chapter 2: Literature review

In this chapter, I examine literature relating to three key topics that provide the research context for this thesis, to locate my research within the broader discourse:

1. Rural revitalization
2. Rural mobilities
3. *Machizukuri* and placemaking

The first section provides an overview of rural revitalization and traces the development of rural areas in Japan since the postwar period. Rural mobilities are then discussed within the broader counterurbanization literature to situate the *den-en kaiki* movement that has emerged in the past decade. The last portion examines placemaking practices in Japan, often referred to as *machizukuri*. In this section, I include the background literature on *akiya*, a challenge faced by many municipalities in rural Japan, to connect placemaking with renovation practices referred to as “renovation *machizukuri*.” The chapter summary identifies key gaps this thesis aims to address.

2.1 Rural revitalization

2.1.1 Decline and shrinkage

Rural decline is a global challenge seen as an inevitable process as societies transform from agrarian to knowledge-based economies (Li et al. 2019). Structural and demographic changes, including aging, low fertility, and depopulation coupled with out-migration, have led to marginalization and decline. The term “decline” for this study refers to the negative impacts experienced by rural communities that lead to a lower standard of living compared to urban areas as a result of reduced services, business closures, and weakening social capital (Li et al. 2019). Depopulation in both urban and rural areas is one of the main causes of shrinkage (Pallagst et al. 2013). Studies on urban shrinkage at a global level have increased over the past 20 years and is a well-known phenomenon (Berglund 2020; J.-E. Lee et al. 2023; Martinez-Fernandez et al. 2012), while rural shrinkage remains overlooked.

Recent scholarship on rural decline (Li et al. 2019; Zang et al. 2020) and related topics such as peripheralization (Kühn 2015; Leibert 2013; Wirth et al. 2016) call for further

study on rural spaces, as rural issues have their own specific set of challenges compared to urban areas (Liu and Li 2017). Existing literature on shrinking cities often features case studies in the US and Europe (J.-E. Lee et al. 2023; Turok and Mykhnenko 2007). These include well-documented examples of decline and revival in cities such as Leipzig, Germany, and Liverpool, England, whose turnaround is largely credited to heavy external public investment (Bernt 2019; Rink et al. 2012). There is a need for more studies from non-Western perspectives to understand decline and shrinkage as a multifaceted process (Haase et al. 2014). The next section introduces the case of Japan's rural areas and traces its development from the postwar era until the present.

2.1.2 Japan's rural areas

Urgent postwar reconstruction in Japan focused on urban areas, which led to widening disparities between urban and rural areas. Subsequent high economic growth further drew large numbers of people, especially the younger generation, from rural to urban areas. Mass rural out-migration, a declining birthrate, and an aging population have led to various challenges for rural areas. These include the weakening of community ties, reduced services such as the closure of schools and transport systems, and unmanaged resources, including abandoned forests, land, and houses (Ochiai 2023). According to the Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism (MLIT 2014a), the overall population of Japan has been declining since reaching its peak of 128.08 million in 2008. Based on the 2020 census, a report by the National Institute of Population and Social Security Research (IPSS 2023) predicts that Japan's population is projected to decrease by 30% to 87 million by 2070 with four out of 10 people aged 65 or older. Depopulation is seen to be an inevitable trend in the future due to natural decreases, low fertility, and low immigration rates coupled with an aging population.

Odagiri (2011) describes four key phases and aspects of rural degradation in Japan. The first was the mass out-migration in the 1960s during Japan's high economic growth after the war. The second phase began in the mid-1980s, when land-use degradation surrounding the farming and forestry industries drastically declined. The third phase from the 1990s points to the degradation of community functions within the villages. The last phase is ongoing and at a deeper level, which is the degradation of pride. This invisible last phase is where people in rural areas feel pessimistic about their future and no longer wish for their children to return.

Sociologist Akira Ono (2005) proposed the term *genkai shūraku* (marginal village) in 1991 to describe a settlement in which more than 50% of its population is over 65 years old. The term often refers to small rural mountain villages or remote island hamlets where a combination of population decline, aging and out-migration have made it difficult to sustain local infrastructure, services, and communal social life. The MIC announced in 2020 that there were 20,372 *genkai shūraku*, accounting for 32% of the 63,237 villages in depopulated areas, an increase of about 10% from the previous survey in 2015 (*Yomiuri shinbun* 2020). Some residents are uncomfortable calling the village they live in “marginal,” leading the MIC to no longer use *genkai shūraku* but instead to adopt the term *shūraku kinō no iji konnan na shūraku* (villages where it is difficult to maintain their village functions). Although many rural areas in Japan have experienced out-migration of young people to cities since the postwar era, the seriousness of rural decline highlighted by Odagiri and Ono became widely discussed in the popular media and academia (Hattori et al. 2017).

Another figure that expanded the discussion of rural depopulation outside academic circles was Hiroya Masuda, former Minister for Internal Affairs and former governor of Iwate Prefecture. Masuda and the Japan Policy Council, a private think tank, published a report that became known as the “Masuda Report.” Released in May 2014, the Masuda Report was widely discussed in the media and attracted national attention for its shocking predictions that if the current trend of low birth rates and aging continues, a total of 896 municipalities out of 1,727 were at risk of disappearing by 2040 (Masuda 2014). Masuda coined the term *shōmetsu kanōsei toshi* (municipalities at risk of vanishing) to describe these at-risk municipalities. If the current rate of depopulation continues, Japan’s population is predicted to be reduced by half to 63 million by 2100. Ten years after the Masuda Report, Masuda and the Population Strategy Council released another report titled *Population Vision 2100* in 2024, which sets a target for Japan to reach a population of 80 million by 2100, so that the ratio of older adults would be at around 30% and the number of foreigners around 10% (Sekine 2024).

Soon after Masuda’s warning, the second Abe cabinet (2010–2020) introduced a series of strategies under the banner of “regional revitalization” in 2014. The new regional revitalization campaign became a key national policy agenda, viewed as a local version of economic growth known as Abenomics, focusing on stimulating rural economies (Kitagawa 2024). The prime minister gathered a group of experts and set up the Headquarters for

Overcoming Population Decline and Vitalizing Local Economy in September 2014 to formulate strategies to address the issues of supporting rural areas and population decline as one body (MLIT 2014b). By December 2014, the “Overcoming Population Decline and Vitalizing Local Economies: Long-term Vision” and “Overcoming Population Decline and Vitalizing Local Economies: Comprehensive Strategy” were introduced as the foundation on which each local government was to establish its own “Rural Population Vision” and “Rural Comprehensive Strategy” (MLIT 2014b). The Regional Revitalization Law enacted in 2016 further introduced government subsidies to promote local revitalization, encouraging local municipalities to act independently and come up with their plans to attract residents and revitalize the local economy. A broad range of incentives and subsidies were adopted to assist the development of rural areas with the belief that population growth is the key to reviving rural areas. However, the goals of decentralization through such policies remain ineffective as the centralization of Tokyo continues (Saito 2021).

2.1.3 Policies and laws on depopulated regions

Though the overall population of Japan did not start decreasing until 2008, population decline in rural Japan had been occurring since decades earlier. Immediately after the end of the Second World War from 1945 to the late 1950s, the economy of mountain villages was relatively stable due to increased agricultural productivity supported by land reforms. This postwar stability was short-lived, as Japan experienced rapid industrialization and enjoyed a hyper-growth period from 1955 to the mid-1960s and early 1970s. Urban industrialization quickly replaced traditional industries such as charcoal and firewood with oil, electricity, and gas (Iwai 2002). This caused a major labor shift that saw large-scale out-migration of the rural population moving to larger cities to fill industrial labor demands (Kakiuchi and Hasegawa 1979). The population of rural farmers and their dependents decreased by 53% from 1955 to 1980 (Kitano 2009). In an early study from the 1970s, Kakiuchi and Hasegawa (1979) observed that homes and farmland were already abandoned in some remote mountain areas across rural Japan, and some villages and hamlets had completely disappeared at the time of their fieldwork. The severe depopulation in rural areas became known as *kasō*, with the most severely depopulated areas referred to as *kasō chiiki*, which are designated by a series of criteria that include the rate of population decrease and financial standing (MIC n.d.).

In April 1975, 1,093 out of 3,203 municipalities were already identified as depopulated (Kakiuchi and Hasegawa 1979). According to an MIC (2022) report, a total of 1,718 municipalities were considered *kasō chiiki*. The word *kasō* was first used in government documents in 1966 and attracted wide media attention, prompting it to enact the 1970 Kasō Chiiki Taisaku Kinkyū Sochi Hō (Act on Emergency Measures for Depopulated Areas; hereafter “Kasō Act”). The law was originally designed to last 10 years but was not seen to be effective and has since been amended and extended four times. Since the 1970 policy was implemented, the government started to subsidize local governments and continuously fund various public works such as the construction of roads, sports arenas, tourism facilities, dams, communication networks, and other large-scale infrastructure. Though public works have significantly improved the physical environments of rural areas (Kim 2021), they had little success at the community level as they often did not address community-specific problems (Kakiuchi and Hasegawa 1979). Others like Alex Kerr (2001) have been more critical of the unnecessary ill-conceived construction that has resulted in excessive concretization and severe environmental damage.

Researchers have summarized the shift in emphasis of spending over the years as one that transitioned from “hard” to “soft” developments, which reflects the state of Japan’s economy over the decades (Atterton et al. 2022; Feldhoff 2013). Initial spending emphasized transport, information, and communication infrastructure (approximately half of all spending) to support villages to invest in hard infrastructure, which was expected to stimulate regional economic growth and stop out-migration and population loss. Since the 1990s when the economy stagnated, a shift to the service sector, including those related to improving the living environment, healthcare, rural tourism, and the cultivation of rural products, aimed to encourage local municipalities to take responsibility for a wide range of “soft” developments (Feldhoff 2013).

The current Kasō Act focuses on the promotion of in-migration, the development of human resources, and other self-reliant strategies that draw upon local assets and resources (Atterton et al. 2022). In 2018, the cabinet approved and submitted a bill to amend the 2014 Act for Overcoming the Population Decline and Vitalizing Local Economy, which included measures such as supporting the regeneration of shopping districts through reactivating vacant stores, increasing employment opportunities, and addressing the overconcentration of people in Tokyo (MLIT 2017). To promote relocation, financial incentives were made

available to families to encourage them to move outside of Tokyo to rural areas. In April 2023, the Japanese government announced it would offer 1 million yen per child under the age of 18 to encourage families from Tokyo and surrounding prefectures to relocate to depopulated regions, provided they meet certain requirements, including staying for at least five years (*Nikkei Asia* 2023). First introduced in 2019, the relocation fee initially offered 300,000 yen per child and supported 71 families in 2019, 290 in 2020, and 1,184 in 2021, when teleworking became more common during the COVID-19 pandemic.

2.1.4 Critiques of rural revitalization

To attract people back to the regions and to counter the overpopulation in Tokyo, decentralization and independence became key strategies adopted by the state (Fujimoto 1992). Early studies on rural revitalization include those that examined the *mura okoshi undō*, or the Village Revival movement (Knight 1994). One key initiative from this period was the *isson ippin undō*, or the One Village, One Product (OVOP) movement. Led by Governor Morihiko Hiramatsu of Oita Prefecture in the late 1970s, the movement focused efforts on the creation of unique products connected to the region to develop its brand and identity. Hiramatsu asked each town and village to come up with original ideas for local products that can be processed and marketed by the local town themselves where possible. Other government-led initiatives, such as the Jiba Sangyō Shinkō Jigyō (Regional Industry Promotion Projects), consisted of large-scale building of rural infrastructure and facilities intended to boost local economies. Such initiatives were seen to have “not only provided almost no beneficial outcomes but have also made the situation worse,” leading to rising government debt with little regard for the actual need for such construction (Matanle 2011).

Another vehicle to achieve independence during the bubble economy was the Furusato Sōseijigyō (Hometown Creation Project) from 1988 to 1989. Initiated by former Prime Minister Noboru Takeshita (serving 1987–1989), the project was designed to aid community development in the form of generous subsidies. The program awarded 100 million yen each to more than 3,300 cities, towns, and villages to fund projects of their choice that creatively invigorate the “hometown spirit” of the area (Fujimoto 1992; Locher 2014). The idea was to give each rural area the autonomy to come up with ideas to revitalize itself while the government provided financial support. Examples include the town of Tsuna-chō on Awaji Island, using the funds to purchase a 63kg gold bar both for investment and notoriety (Locher 2014). Other rural municipalities used the money to fund various building

projects. Many were completed during the 1980s economic bubble, leading to a proliferation of public buildings such as museums and other institutional and community facilities—all considered examples of “hard” infrastructure.

The building of hard infrastructure across Japan continued into the post-bubble period in the early 1990s. A corrupt system emerged called the *doken kokka* (construction state), where politicians, bureaucrats, and business leaders colluded to exploit public investment in the funding of construction works (McCormack and Field 2016). The term *hakemono* emerged to refer to the construction of buildings that were bland box-like “things” (*mono*) that lacked character and did little to reflect local identity (Locher 2014). Many *hakemono* became abandoned following the collapse of the bubble economy in the mid-1990s when governmental funding dried up, leaving municipalities no longer able to afford ongoing running and maintenance costs.

Some towns saw architecture as an opportunity to create a brand identity to attract tourism. These include the Hiroshige Museum in the town of Bato, Tochigi Prefecture. Bato commissioned celebrated Japanese architect Kengo Kuma to complete the design of a prefectural art museum dedicated to the Ukiyo-e artist Hiroshige Andō. Kuma incorporated local materials including local cedar and *washi* (handcrafted paper) to produce a building that was contemporary but not far from the traditional regional architecture in its scale and relationship to context (Locher 2014). This single building by a well-known architect to jump-start rural revitalization was not unusual for small communities at the time but ultimately failed to catalyze lasting socioeconomic revitalization for the town (Locher 2014, 65).

Locher (2014) studied the Hiroshige Museum project and noted that the first two years were a success with more than 214,000 visits including many foreign architects, researchers, and media. However, more than 10 years after that, the building proved not to be the answer to the town’s problems. After such a big investment in the museum, the town had little money left to pursue its initial plans for additional construction to connect the museum to the traditional downtown area. The visitor numbers have since stabilized and the increase in tourism has not generated as high numbers of new businesses as the town had hoped. The building also did not pay off in financial terms—admission fees and profits from souvenirs and restaurant sales were not close to covering the initial cost of the building, which totaled 1.2 billion yen, not to mention the ongoing running costs and management. Locher (2014)

argues that while the “brand architecture” did not pay off economically, perhaps it did pay off as a means to increase civic pride, as the building attempted to create a distinct identity to invigorate community spirit. Locher (2014, 65) states that “such buildings were not intended to be financial blockbusters but rather to stimulate economic growth and civic pride.” In the end, however, Bato’s population and economy could not sustain the momentum from the initial opening of the museum, which was ultimately an insufficient incentive for young people to stay.

Central governments have continued to provide subsidies to fund rural infrastructure in an attempt to provide employment and boost local economies resulting in the accumulation of large amounts of debt (Matanle 2011). The 1987 Law for the Development of Comprehensive Resort Areas (known as the “Resort Law”) showed the government’s support for large-scale public works that benefit construction businesses. To spread the construction boom happening in the large cities to the countryside, the government encouraged private companies to participate in the form of public-private partnerships to create large-scale resorts and recreational facilities, including golf courses and ski resorts, effectively making the creation and development of leisure facilities a national project (Funck 1999). While the law aimed to revive peripheral regions through domestic tourism, plans for development projects drew criticism due to a lack of local participation in the planning process as well as their detrimental environmental effects (Tsuyuzaki 1994). Extreme cases of unwise spending have led to bankruptcies of entire towns, as seen in the case of Yubari City in Hokkaido (Seaton 2010).

In summary, local municipalities continue to channel central government funds on public construction because these allocations must be spent within the fiscal year. This creates dependence on subsidies, encourages unnecessary investment, and results in overbuilding and costly maintenance of public works (Kim 2021). Scholars echo this concern, arguing that municipalities must look beyond hard infrastructure and instead strengthen community resilience to reduce reliance on external resources and subsidies (Feldhoff 2013; Ji and Imai 2022).

2.1.5 Toward alternative forms of revitalization

Government policies on regional development currently emphasize the need for rural municipalities to come up with their own place-specific initiatives based on local

individuality and self-reliance. This is a major shift from centralized structural change and suggests that the debate on regional revitalization must be framed differently from the past (Samuta 2020). Scholars have noted a change that increasingly values participatory models of governance from exogenous (driven from the outside) and endogenous (driven from within) models to neo-endogenous approaches (Gkartzios and Lowe 2019). Neo-endogenous ways of thinking have been advocated as a mechanism to support bottom-up development, allowing local people to drive change from the ground up with top-down support from the government (Eversole and Campbell 2023; Ward et al. 2005). Thus, how to recover and revitalize rural areas through hybrid neo-endogenous models involving local actors, nongovernmental organizations, and government bodies is seen to be key to the future development of rural areas. Current literature on the Japanese context agrees that the importance of self-reliance, autonomy, and the use of local resources is crucial for success in regional revitalization (Lewerich 2020; Matanle and Rausch 2011).

Alternatives to top-down strategies include “self-help” and “self-revitalization” approaches initiated by residents, local organizations, NPOs, activists, student groups, and academics in recent years (Dilley et al. 2017; Ji 2021; Love 2013). The ability and capacity of citizens and residents are seen as the key to achieving rural sustainability by focusing on small-scale changes aimed at improving the lives of those who live in the rural area (Li et al. 2019). Often referred to as *machizukuri* practices, loosely translated to community design, the rise of community-initiated responses is seen as a promising sign of resilience, as citizens draw on local and available resources rather than rely on outside help and financial assistance (Sato 2020; Sorensen and Funck 2007). *Machizukuri* can also be viewed as a kind of neo-endogenous placemaking (Mamula-Seadon et al. 2015), where citizens take ownership to shape their living environment while drawing on advice from experts as needed.

Several scholars have discussed the need to find ways to adapt to shrinkage by learning how to live well beyond growth (Matanle and Sato 2010). Concepts such as adopting an “adaptive approach” (Chang 2018), in which shrinkage is accepted and utilized to consider how communities can transform to accommodate shrinkage in positive ways, have been proposed to encourage municipalities to acknowledge, accept, adjust to, and even embrace shrinkage (Matanle and Sato 2010). These include the town of Kamiyama in their adoption of creative depopulation, and the case of Sado Island adopting the slogan to become a *sumiyasui tokoro* (place for comfortable living), both focusing on livability rather than population

recovery. Adaptive approaches prioritize the wellbeing of the residents and often make use of site-specific assets in realistic ways rather than seeking to recover the population as the top priority.

In Japan, “regional value” (*chiiki no kachi*) has become an important concept when considering regional development (Mochizuki 2021). How can the unique features of a region be promoted to attract tourists and newcomers who then enjoy and promote this value to others? The shift from improvement in physical hard infrastructure to strengthening social networks can be seen as a key shift in recent scholarship and case studies on rural revitalization today. This is where the role of rural in-migrants and various community revitalization activities, often referred to as *machizukuri*, come in. As rural areas and Japan as a whole experience continued depopulation, diverse efforts to revitalize regions at the local level are vital. The increased interest and mobility of young people engaging with the countryside requires further examination to understand the situation on the ground. The next section reviews the existing literature on counterurbanization and rural mobilities.

2.2 Rural mobilities

2.2.1 Beyond counterurbanization

The term “counterurbanization,” also referred to in the literature as “counter-urban migration” (Andersen 2011) or “urban-rural migration” (Costello 2007), refers to the perceived nontraditional migration pattern and movement of people from cities to less-urban, rural, or peripheral areas (McAreavey 2017). Scholars have noted that the term can vary considerably geographically, culturally, and socially, leading to the “messy” nature of contemporary counterurbanization processes (Mitchell 2004, Stockdale 2016). The 1970s was known as the “decade of counter-urbanization” (Champion 2001), with visible trends of increased flow from urban to rural areas in developed countries, including the US, the UK, and Australia (Berry 1976; Brown et al. 1980; A. J. Fielding 1989; Hugo and Smailes 1985). Notable waves of counterurbanization did not appear in East Asian countries until around 20 years later when they emerged on a smaller scale in the 1990s in South Korea (Ma et al. 2018) and China (Chen 2021; Démurger and Xu 2011), in addition to Japan.

As scholars started to research the causes of counterurbanization, many offered the “people-led” explanation, which was based on concepts such as “amenity migration” and

“lifestyle migration” (Benson and O’Reilly 2016; Gosnell and Abrams 2011; Hoey 2005). In the lifestyle migration literature, Benson and O’Reilly (2009) conceptualized this form of counterurbanization as a conscious search for a different way of life, often framed as “anti-urban,” where the main motivation for moving is to “escape to the good life.” N. Ishikawa (2018) notes that although both counterurbanization and lifestyle migration involve migrants seeking a higher quality of life, the former focuses on population trends rather than on how migration choices relate to lived experiences. This highlights the need for further exploration of how migration connects to individual values and aspirations, because for migrants, “a choice about where to live is also one about how to live” (Hoey 2005, 347).

The notion of counterurbanization falls short in capturing the diverse types of mobilities that have emerged in contemporary society, prompting the need for more critical engagement with a broad range of movements and scales of mobility present in rural spaces today (Bijker and Haartsen 2012; Halfacree 2008; Milbourne 2007; Yan et al. 2023). Scholars have also highlighted the need for more universal narratives to more accurately capture the complexity of rural mobilities, which have become the main factor affecting rural populations since 2000 (Yan et al. 2023). Recent studies argue for a more “cosmopolitan” view of rurality (Gorman-Murray et al. 2012; Nelson et al. 2022; Traphagan 2020) to blur outdated urban/rural binaries and acknowledge the contemporary countryside as increasingly mixed and hybrid places (Clope 2006; Murdoch 2003; Woods 2010). Such increased mobility, further enabled by advances in transportation and telecommunications, calls for updated and expanded understandings grounded in local-and individual-level analyses (Bijker and Haartsen 2012; Halfacree 2008; Milbourne 2007).

Strands of counterurbanization, such as lifestyle migration, are often seen as a privileged form of mobility (Janoschka and Haas 2014). These types of mobility are usually associated with more permanent, one-off moves, such as the case of middle-class British people moving to rural France (Benson 2011). Drawing on the idea of mobilities and a “new mobilities paradigm,” scholars have acknowledged that our everyday lives have become increasingly mobile (Cresswell 2010; Sheller and Urry 2006), leading to concepts such as “lifestyle mobility” (Cohen et al. 2015), which aim to capture more fluid and ongoing processes that blur the boundaries between travel, leisure, and migration. In her study of young urban-rural migrants in Japan, Klien (2020) categorizes her informants as participants

in “life mobility,” referring to Cohen et al.’s (2015) call for a more flexible lens to analyze mobility, either temporary or long-term, as an ongoing process.

Lifestyle mobilities are diverse, not limited to well-off individuals, and range from countercultural dropouts to downshiftners looking for an alternative and more meaningful life (Janoschka and Haas 2014, 1). The *den-en kaiki* movement in Japan has been described as a precursor to counterurbanization (Isoda 2017), with optimistic predictions that the number of people moving to rural areas will continue to increase. Other scholars believe that the current scale of rural mobilities does “not suggest that this constitutes a dominant trend nor has it created any largescale urban ‘migration turnaround’, as has been the case in other western contexts across different periods” (Champion 1998, p. 256, as cited in Dilley et al. 2022, 7). While the current trend of counterurbanization remains modest in Japan, the sustained interest in rural living and aspirations to contribute to the future sustainability of rural areas since the “cultural turn” of the 1990s (Sheller and Urry 2006) and the “mobility turn” from the 2010s (Teraoka 2020) have led to new ways of life and diverse mobilities in the Japanese countryside that deserve further examination (Ji 2024).

2.2.2 Japan’s return to the countryside movement

When the Masuda Report was released in 2014, predicting the disappearance of depopulated villages, a movement known as *den-en kaiki* emerged. Scholars such as Tokumi Odagiri (2014, 2015) and Hiroshi Fujiyama (2015) have critiqued Masuda’s claims as premature and discuss shrinkage and depopulation in a more positive light, asserting that rural communities will not disappear. One of their key criticisms is that Masuda does not account for the *den-en kaiki* movement, which highlights the high mobility of young people today (Teraoka 2020). Furthermore, Odagiri (2015) opposes top-down government measures such as the consolidation of schools and hospitals to reduce administrative load for more efficiency, arguing that such policies would encourage rural residents to relocate closer to essential services and thereby further weaken rural communities.

Den-en kaiki has been translated as “Return to the Country” (N. Ishikawa 2018; Sakuno 2016), “Return to Pastoral Life” (Teraoka 2020), “Return to Rural Living” (Kojima 2021; Odagiri 2015, 2017; Nishino 2020), and “Rural Return” (Abe and Tani 2023). The phenomenon of urban residents showing more interest in relocating to rural areas was first identified in the mid-1990s (Samuta 2020) and continued into the 2000s with the trend of

furusato kaiki (Return to Hometown) among retired baby boomers (Sakuno 2023). It was not until 2015, in the MIC's *White Paper on Food, Agriculture and Rural Areas*, that the term *den-en kaiki* appeared in a government document, signifying that the trend had become a recognized national movement (Odagiri 2017). Policy documents discussing *den-en kaiki* typically frame it within the context of rural revitalization and pro-migration strategies (Kojima 2021). Thus, one key difference between young people relocating to rural areas as part of the *den-en kaiki* movement in Japan and lifestyle migrants in other developed countries is the expectation that the former will actively contribute to rural revitalization rather than only consume rural products and services (N. Ishikawa 2018).

One of the challenges in understanding the scale and impact of *den-en kaiki* is the scarcity of accurate quantitative data, largely due to the different criteria adopted by municipalities to define who counts as an in-migrant. Some in-migrants stay only briefly before moving to another rural area or returning to the city. In a survey by Odagiri (2017), two restrictive conditions were applied: in-migrants were defined as those who had moved across prefectures, and those who had utilized migration support services. The findings report that the number of people moving from cities to farming, mountain and fishing villages nationwide was 2,864 in 2009, increasing to 11,735 in 2014, with a prominent number of young people in their 20s and 30s. Odagiri's (2017, 13) results also confirmed that the distribution of in-migrants is uneven. In 2014, for example, the top five prefectures attracting rural in-migrants were Okayama, Shimane, Nagano, Tottori, and Gifu, which together accounted for 47.6% of all in-migrants. Areas that already had an established in-migrant population were more likely to attract additional newcomers.

Despite existing studies pointing to an increased interest in relocation to rural areas, the MIC (2018) reported an overall decline in the number of people moving from urban areas into depopulated regions, from around 400,000 in 2000 to about 250,000 in 2015 (see also Sato 2022). The report suggests that this nationwide decrease may be linked to the broader population decline, including reductions in the number of people in their 20s and 30s, who are typically more mobile (MIC 2018). As noted earlier, definitions of who counts as an in-migrant can vary between studies, and some individuals who do not register a change of address—or who maintain dual residences—may still contribute to the *den-en kaiki* movement.

Since the emergence of *den-en kaiki*, there has been a notable shift in how in-migration is discussed in the media, which portrays the countryside with more positive connotations. It is now common to see terms such as “rural living” (*inaka gurashi*), “social entrepreneurship” (*shakai kigyō*), “self-actualization” (*jiko jitsugen*), and “exchange” (*kōryū*) in various media, such as lifestyle magazines featuring success stories of city dwellers moving to the countryside. This marks a clear departure from the dominant postwar research on return migration, referred to as U-turn or “U-turners,” who were rural residents returning to their hometowns after living in cities (Y. Ishikawa 2011). Previously, the general belief was that life in cities was more attractive, and people only returned to their rural hometowns to take over the family business, look after aging family members, or return to farming after retirement (Tsutsui et al. 2016). In recent years, there has been a growing trend of people who move from large metropolitan areas to regional areas that are not their original hometowns, called “I-turners,” who are usually attracted to the countryside because of the more attractive natural environment (Y. Ishikawa 2011).

It is now common to see media reports showcasing the success stories of U-turn and I-turn migrants (also referred to as U-turner and I-turners) who have become rural entrepreneurs, often running small businesses in stylishly renovated properties. Their ventures create a new representation of the rural—one in which urban and rural elements are combined to form a “cosmopolitan rurality” (Traphagan 2020). As many migrants come from cities, they bring with them a slice of urban life, particular aesthetics, tastes, and styles. Odagiri (2017) stresses the importance of understanding *den-en kaiki* not only in quantitative terms (since large-scale population recovery is unlikely) but also in terms of the valuable human resources (*jinzai*) migrants represent. These individuals can exert considerable communication influence by promoting the charms of rural areas through social media, blogs, and other platforms, thereby encouraging more people to develop an interest in rural places. According to Odagiri (2017), greater attention should be directed toward identifying and showcasing the unique characteristics and values of each region for the *den-en kaiki* movement to reach a wider audience. Tanigaki (2017) further argues that increased tourism and the rise of the *kankei jinkō* (relationship population), people who maintain diverse forms of connection with rural areas without residing there, can also contribute meaningfully to rural communities as part of the broader *den-en kaiki* movement.

In this thesis, I use the term in-migrants to refer to individuals who move into rural areas from other parts of Japan, but this group is far from homogeneous. Three main pathways are commonly distinguished in the Japanese context. I-turn migrants (I-turners) are those who relocate from urban areas to a rural community with which they have no prior personal or familial ties. U-turn migrants (U-turners), by contrast, return to their rural hometowns after living elsewhere and have existing ties. J-turn migrants occupy a middle position: they return to the same region or prefecture but settle in a different rural area that better suits their preferences or opportunities. These distinctions highlight the diverse backgrounds, motivations, and forms of belonging among those moving into rural Japan and provide a more nuanced understanding of how different kinds of in-migrants participate in rural life. Figure 2.1 illustrates the diversity of mobilities within the *den-en kaiki* movement, with the categories included in this study shown in black boxes. Other groups also exist, shown in grey, but are not the focus of this thesis.

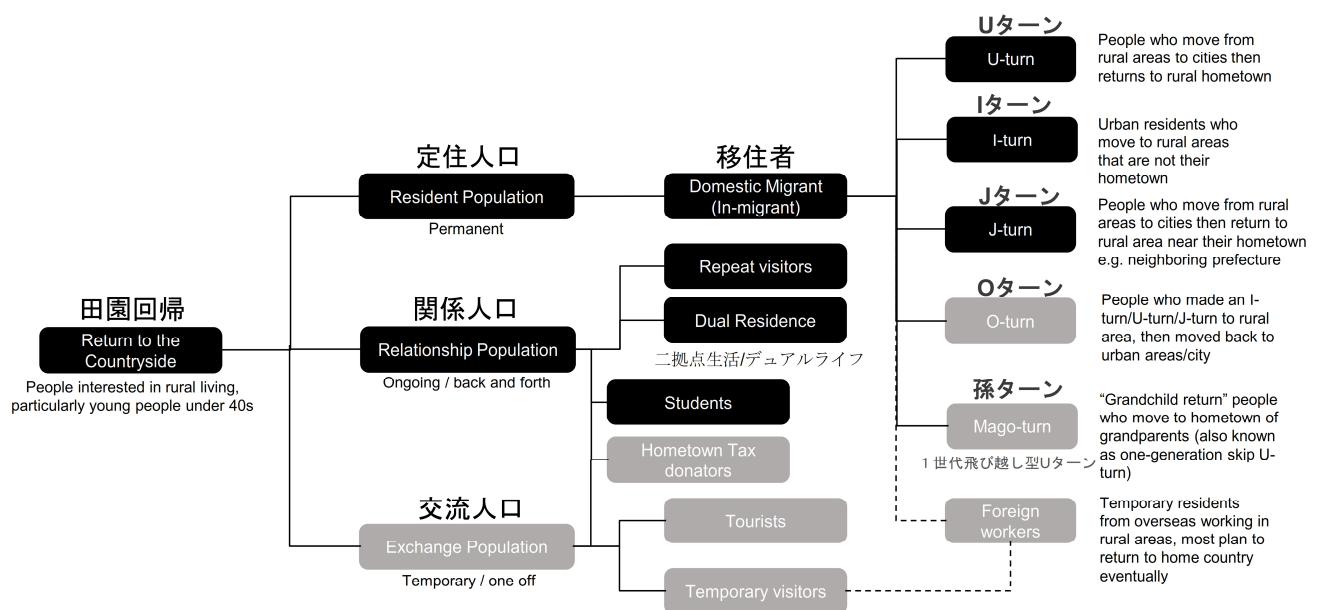


Figure 2.1. Categories of rural in-migrant mobilities in Japan, illustrating I-turn, U-turn, and J-turn, the main groups included in this study.

2.2.3 Policies aimed at rural in-migration

The shocking predictions on the disappearance of regional areas (*chihō shōmetsu*) by the 2014 Masuda Report prompted further measures and incentives to promote rural areas by local municipalities to support in-migration and settlement. The Japanese government and local municipalities were already investing in various programs and subsidies to attract urbanites to relocate to rural areas throughout the 2000s (Dilley et al. 2022; Shiraishi and Matoba 2019). In 2008, the Inaka de Hatarakitai (We Want to Work in the Countryside!) program, known as the Rural Labor Squad, was launched. The initiative provided training programs for city dwellers to experience rural living by helping at the many farms facing labor shortages, in the hope that they would relocate (Feldhoff 2013). The scheme was a pilot stimulus plan in response to rising unemployment, especially among Japanese youth. In 2009, the Chiiki Okoshi Kyōryokutai (COKT) program was established by the MIC with similar goals of providing an avenue for urbanites to move to rural areas. Since 2016, the Inaka de Hatarakitai program merged with the COKT program.

The COKT program enlists urbanites to live and work in targeted rural areas for one to three years. During this time, they are guaranteed employment by the local town with a fixed salary. The initiative has been seen to have a major impact on the *den-en kaiki* movement by promoting in-migration (Nishino 2020). The number of participants has increased since the program was first introduced in 2009 from 89 people from 31 municipalities to 7,200 people from 1164 municipalities in 2023 (MIC 2024a). According to data from 2021, participant ages vary, but young people in their 20s and 30s make up approximately 70%. The average age of participants is mid-30s, and around 60% are male and 40% are female. The role of COKT participants is to contribute to revitalization efforts through various activities such as tourism promotion, migration support, agriculture, forestry, and other local industries. The government allocates funding for each placement of individuals in a local municipality. Although not all participants choose to remain in their rural placements after completion of the program and numbers vary depending on the region, the MIC website states that the settlement rate is around 70%.⁵ The success of the program is yet to be seen in the long run, with criticism of the program including a lack of capacity in some local municipalities to direct COKT members to carry out meaningful work (also

⁵ See https://www.soumu.go.jp/main_sosiki/jichi_gyousei/c-gyousei/02gyousei08_03000066.html

confirmed during my fieldwork), leading to some COKT participants feeling stifled and unproductive (Zollet and Qu 2024). Nevertheless, the COKT program has been seen as a unique case of a nation-level policy supporting in-migration, which sees counterurbanization as the key to rural revitalization.

2.2.4 Renewed interest in rural living

Renewed interest in the countryside continued to gain attention after the 2008 GFC and the 2011 Great East Japan Earthquake. These major events led some city dwellers to rethink their values and to seek out life in rural areas with stronger community bonds and higher levels of self-sufficiency (Takahashi et al. 2021). The media has also reported that the COVID-19 pandemic has contributed to a rising interest in rural areas with the rise in remote work and a desire to rethink priorities (M. Lee and Inuma 2021). Though accurate numbers on counterurbanization in Japan are difficult to obtain due to a lack of data on the national level, reports in the media and recent academic studies show a rise in young Japanese people who are interested in rural living for noneconomic reasons (Dilley et al. 2022; N. Ishikawa 2018; Ji 2021; Klien 2020; Odagiri 2017). Several surveys further confirm an increased interest in rural life. In 2014, the Japanese government's public opinion survey on rural areas found that 31.6% of 3,000 respondents were interested in moving to rural areas, an increase of 20.6% from the previous survey conducted in 2005 (Cabinet Office 2014). There has also been an increase in consultations and inquiries reported by NPOs that support urban-rural migration. One of these is the NPO Hometown Return Support Centre (NPO Hōjin Furusato Kaiki Shien Sentā), which experienced record-high consultations in 2021, close to 50,000 people (Figure 2.2).

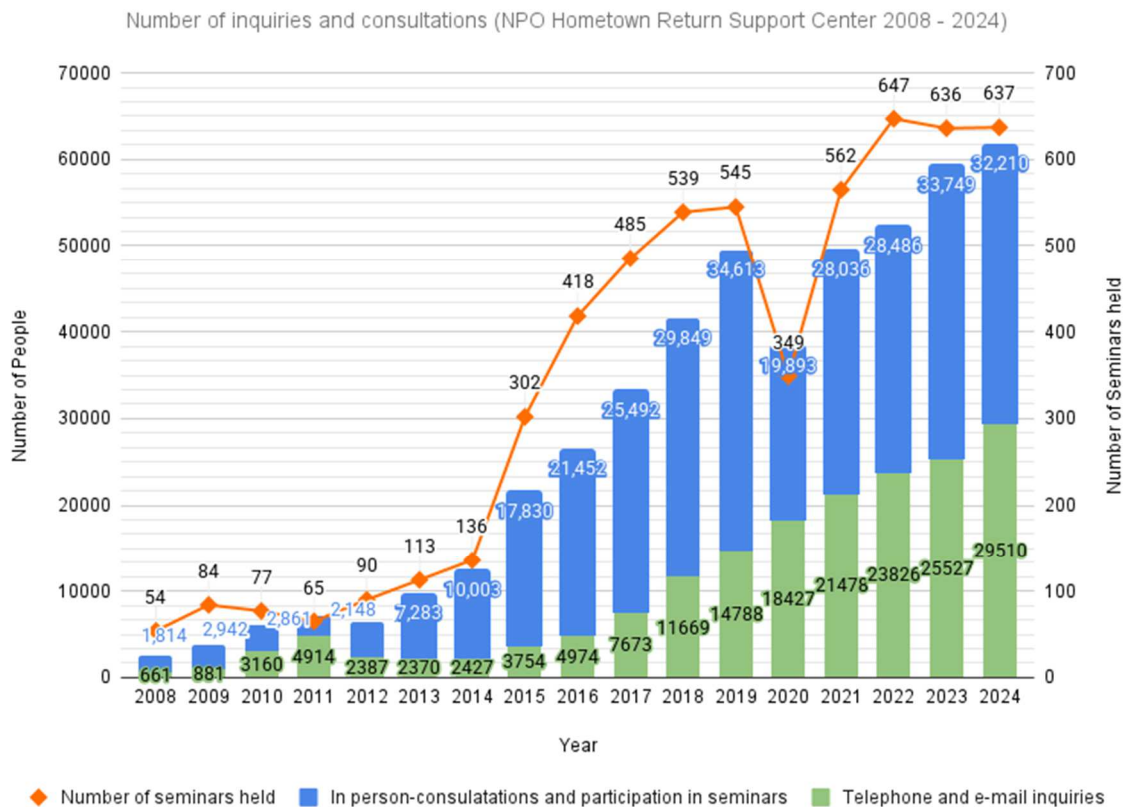


Figure 2.2. The number of inquiries, consultations and seminars held by NPO Hometown Return Support Centre in Tokyo, 2008–2024.

Source: Data adapted from NPO Hometown Return Support Centre, *2024 Survey Results*, <https://www.furusatokaiki.net/>

Data released by the center also shows a steady increase in consultations, inquiries, and information seminars since 2008. Despite the pandemic canceling many consultations and seminars in 2020, the transition to online consultations has seen numbers back up in 2021. The data confirmed the increase in consultations from people in their 20s to 40s, with the largest cohort of inquiries coming from those in their 30s, which rose from 12% in 2018 to over 30% in 2020 (Figure 2.3). This differs significantly from 2008, when people aged 60 or older made up nearly half of the consultations. The government sees this as an opportunity to attract young people and has introduced generous support measures, including subsidies of up to 3 million yen to help support new businesses (Prime Minister of Japan and His Cabinet 2018).

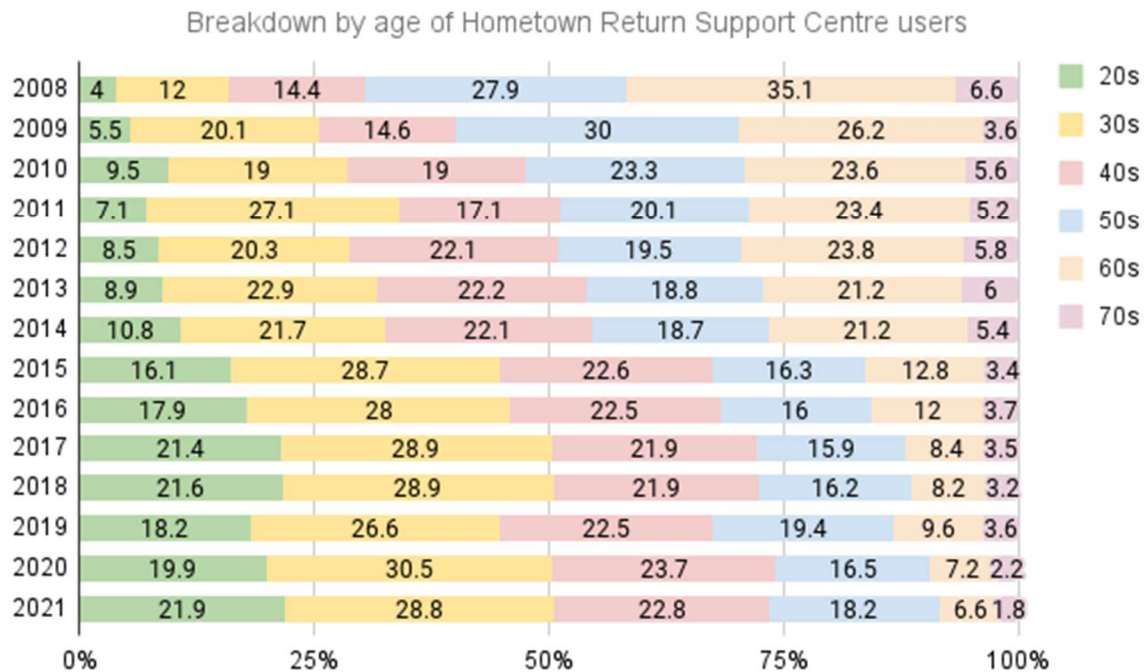


Figure 2.3. Change in age of users who inquired and attended consultations or seminars held by NPO Hometown Return Support Centre in Tokyo.

Source: Data adapted from NPO Hometown Return Support Centre, *2021 Survey Results*, <https://www.furusatokaiki.net/>

In the current literature, counterurbanizing individuals are often referred to as “urban-rural migrants,” or simply “in-migrants.” In this context, migration denotes internal domestic movement referring to people relocating from one region of Japan to another. The Japanese term *ijū* describes such domestic migration, and those who make the move are known as *ijū-sha*. Many rural municipalities employ dedicated staff to support and promote *ijū* with the hopes that *ijū-sha* can increase the *teijū jinkō* (permanent resident population). Events such as *ijū* fairs and free consultation sessions are commonly offered to prospective *ijū-sha*.

A key difference from earlier migration trends, in addition to the shift toward a younger demographic, is that many are not returning to their hometowns. Instead, they are choosing rural communities with which they have little or no prior connection (Y. Ishikawa 2011; Odagiri 2017; Sakuno 2016; Sasaki 2018). The Japanese government has also begun encouraging more diverse forms of urban–rural mobility among younger generations, including both short- and long-term engagements, as part of broader decentralization and rural revitalization strategies. This is evident in the growing promotion of the *kankei jinkō* (relationship population), which will be discussed in the next section.

2.2.5 Diverse relationships with rural areas

In addition to *ijū* and *teijū*, new concepts such as *kankei jinkō* (relationship population) and *kōryū jinkō* (exchange population) have emerged in recent years. The *kankei jinkō* refers to individuals who engage in various activities in rural areas without settling there permanently. This term refers to individuals who maintain an ongoing connection, or “relationship,” with a particular region outside their primary place of residence. They are seen to be somewhere in-between the *kōryū jinkō* (exchange population), who visit a region for short-term work or tourism, and the *teijū jinkō* (permanent population), the long-term settled population (Teraoka 2020). Introduced around 2016, the concept has gained increasing attention in recent years (Sakuno 2023).

The *kankei jinkō* maintain diverse relationships with rural areas and engage in various forms of participation, such as helping with local annual festivals, sustaining interest and involvement in rural communities, and forming roots and attachment. As young people today are increasingly mobile, the government sees growing potential for them to build personal relationships with rural communities and find unique roles in collaboration with local residents. A 2020 survey conducted by the MLIT (2021) found that about 20% of Japan’s population over the age of 18—approximately 18 million out of 106 million people—can be classified as part of the *kankei jinkō*. As Japan is unlikely to experience a significant demographic turnaround, scholars argue for broader and more flexible definitions of mobility and population trends, giving further prominence to the *kankei jinkō* (Dilley et al. 2022, Inoue et al. 2022).

The government has also increasingly recognized the importance of the *kankei jinkō* as one of the key pillars in regional development strategies and a promising alternative measure to address revitalization as population recovery becomes increasingly unrealistic (Inoue et al. 2022). The emphasis is on building long-term relationships with people from outside the region by showing them the real-life challenges faced by rural communities and encouraging deeper forms of participation in revitalization efforts. In this way, the concept offers a broader framework for understanding how a wider group of individuals can contribute to community revitalization beyond simply consuming rural products and services as tourists. With the overall population of Japan decreasing, current levels of rural immigration remain insufficient to denote any significant urban decentralization, nor are they expected to reverse rural depopulation (Dilley et al. 2022). In this context, an overreliance on

in-migration has been critiqued as a “zero-sum game,” in which municipalities compete with one another for a shrinking pool of newcomers.

The *den-en kaiki* movement reflects these developments and confirms the growing interest among young people in engaging with rural areas in diverse ways. While there are many ways to engage with rural communities, many newcomers, whether they are part of the *kankei jinkō* or in-migrants, find themselves participating in various placemaking activities, either through revitalization efforts or through personal motivations. The next section discusses the literature on placemaking and its role in community revitalization. In the Japanese context, the term *machizukuri* is often used to refer to community-led placemaking practices (Mamula-Seadon et al. 2015). More recently, the term “renovation *machizukuri*” has emerged to describe placemaking practices focused on the renovation of buildings and spaces. In today’s postgrowth society, the proliferation of vacant space and buildings has created “more opportunities for new placemaking experiments” as a form of social design involving diverse actors (Dimmer 2016, 222).

2.3 *Machizukuri* and placemaking

The term *machizukuri* was first used in the early 1950s. It consists of the Japanese words *machi* (city or town) and *zukuri* (to make), which together translates to “city/town-making.” Planning scholar Shunichi J. Watanabe (2007) contrasts *machizukuri* with the traditional statutory city planning in Japan known as *toshi keikaku* (city planning). *Toshi keikaku* is an older term, dating back to 1913, that describes a top-down planning system grounded in a set of national laws issued by the central government. In contrast, *machizukuri* is bottom-up and often involves NPOs, neighborhood associations, and citizen groups.

While there is no single definition, *machizukuri* scholar Shigeru Satoh (2020, 236) describes it as a methodology “of adaptive action design process, which involves bottom-up creative approaches based on collective action and the conscious use of the available local resources and human skills.” Others translate the term as “place or city making, implying that it is done with care” (Mamula-Seadon et al. 2015). In short, the diverse efforts of local citizens and community groups across fields related to placemaking and its related disciplines such as architecture, planning, and heritage, have come to be grouped under the umbrella term *machizukuri* (Sorensen and Funck 2007).

Machizukuri has also played a major role in post-disaster reconstruction. Following the 1995 Great Hanshin-Awaji Earthquake in Kobe, an unprecedented number of volunteers mobilized, and over 100 *machizukuri* organizations became active immediately after the disaster. In 1998, the Law to Promote Specified Non-profit Activities (the NPO Law) was established, allowing NPOs and community groups to incorporate and obtain equal legal standing with government institutions. This proved crucial after the 2011 Great East Japan Earthquake in Tōhoku. The disaster triggered a rise in socially engaged design with a focus on the role of architects, activists, and designers to lead participatory placemaking practices that emphasized place specificness, co-creation, and community resilience (Dimmer 2016). *Machizukuri* underscored the importance of self-help initiatives that leverage social capital and community networks to rebuild soft infrastructure—often overlooked by government efforts that prioritize the physical rebuilding of hard infrastructure (Ji and Imai 2022). By the 2000s, *machizukuri* had become widespread and was recognized as an integral community-based approach to placemaking in Japan.

Renovation *machizukuri* is a strand of *machizukuri* that addresses challenges associated with the surplus of buildings and vacant space (Ji 2022; Shimizu 2014; Uzui 2020). Placemaking activities involve the renovation of vacant space have given rise to renovation communities across Japan, frequently involving volunteers working alongside professionals through do-it-yourself (DIY) practices. The next section examines the issue of *akiya* (vacant houses), which is an ongoing challenge in both urban and rural Japan.

2.3.1 The vacant house problem

Japan faced a severe housing shortage in the postwar high economic growth period (1955–1972), as large numbers of people migrated from rural areas to urban centers. After the war ended in 1945, there was a shortfall of around 4.2 million housing units, prompting the government to prioritize the urgent task of rapid housing construction. Policies encouraging housing construction and home ownership were introduced during the postwar years, including the so-called “three pillars for housing policy” formulated in the 1950s (Kobayashi 2016). These comprised: 1) the establishment of the Government Housing Loan Corporation in 1950 to support housing construction through long-term, low-interest fixed-rate loans for middle-income households; 2) the Public Housing Act of 1951, which authorized the construction of public rental housing for low-income households; and 3) the creation of the Japan Housing Corporation in 1955, which promoted the collective construction of housing,

most notably large-scale *danchi* housing estates, and undertook the large-scale development and supply of residential land. Together, these measures, along with structural changes such as relaxed city planning regulations, stimulated mass housing construction as a core engine of postwar economic growth. During this period, the vacancy rate was only 2.5% in 1963. By 1968, the number of houses exceeded the number of households nationwide, and by 1973 this was the case in all prefectures (Kadomatsu et al. 2020).

The 1973 oil shock marked the end of the high-growth era, shifting Japan's economy into a prolonged period of low growth. Despite this economic transition, the rate and number of new housing construction did not slow down. During the 1980s, speculative investment and financial deregulation further fueled housing and land development, while in the 1990s, the construction sector remained an important source of employment and economic stimulus in the aftermath of the asset bubble collapse (Sorensen 2005). As a result, large volumes of suburban housing continued to be constructed throughout the 1980s and 1990s, and it was not until 2009 that the annual housing starts finally fell below one million units after more than 40 years (Morita and Kim 2021).

According to MIC (2024b), as of October 1, 2023, Japan had 65 million housing units—an increase of 4.2% since 2018. The total number of households at the time was 56 million. The total number of vacant houses exceeded 9 million, or around 13.8% of total housing stock (Figure 2.4; MIC 2024b). This represents an increase of 500,000 compared to 8.5 million in 2018 and is nearly double the 4.5 million recorded in 1993. Japan's housing market is now overbuilt, with an oversupply of existing housing stock. New housing construction has not significantly decreased, while the number of vacant houses continues to rise. While population decline is often cited as the main driver of rising vacancies, a key structural cause lies in long-standing residential policies that continue to prioritize new construction. The combination of excess supply and demographic decline has produced increasingly uneven development and growing housing inequalities.

Trends in the number and percentages of vacant houses nationwide
(1978-2023)

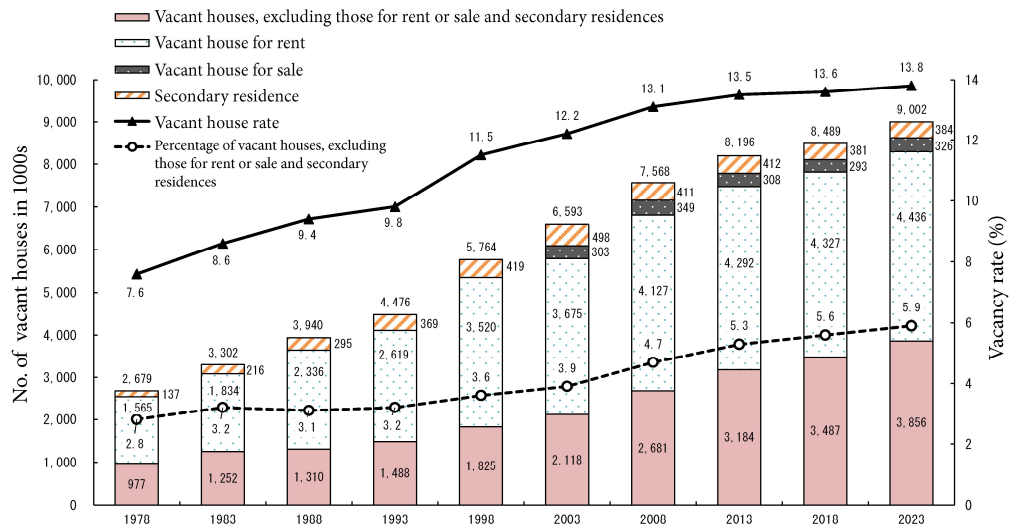


Figure 2.4. Change in the number of vacant houses nationwide (1978–2023).

Source: Base graph adapted from the MIC's (2024b) report, *Reiwa 5-nen jūtaku / tochi tōkei chōsa: Jūtaku oyobi setai ni kansuru kihon shūkei (kakuho shūkei) kekka* [2023 Housing and Land Statistical Survey: Basic (confirmed) aggregation of results regarding houses and households]. MIC. https://www.stat.go.jp/data/jyutaku/2023/pdf/kihon_gaiyou.pdf

Hirayama and Izuhara (2018) note the widening housing inequalities between the younger and older generations, reflecting Japan's shift into a postgrowth society. The older generation was able to benefit from the high-growth era, securing stable employment and in turn home ownership. By contrast, the younger generation today face widening precarity, declining job security, and the absence of comparable housing policies to help them obtain home ownership (Hirayama and Izuhara 2018). As a result, home ownership among younger generations has fallen sharply in recent decades: between 1983 to 2018, home ownership dropped from 45.7% to 26.3 % for those aged 30–34, and from 60.1% to 44% for those aged 35–39 (Hirayama 2022). In addition to the unstable employment, delayed marriage and rising number of unmarried young adults have further contributed to low home ownership rates.

Against this backdrop, vacant housing has become a major topic of public debate in Japan, repeatedly appearing in both academic literature and popular media. In their survey of urban shrinkage discourses, Hattori et al. (2017) found that discussions on vacant houses have dominated since 2011. The increase in vacant houses has come to be known as the *akiya mondai* (vacant house problem). Common concerns include reduced neighborhood security

and safety, illegal dumping, and negative impacts on the landscape and environment due to long-term neglect (Kubo and Mashita 2020; Suzuki et al. 2022). *Akiya* therefore represents not only an outcome of demographic and economic decline, but also a major obstacle in the revitalization of declining areas and diminish the quality of life for nearby residents (Accordino and Johnson 2000). As such, they are increasingly recognized not only as a public safety and health risk but a broader social problem (Kadomatsu et al. 2020; Kubo and Yui 2020). Scholars argue that rising housing vacancies require new administrative strategies and forms of governance (Kubo and Mashita 2020).

Existing studies examined the cause of *akiya* and the reasons properties remain unused (Baba and Hino 2019; Kadomatsu et al. 2020; Kubo 2020; Kubo and Mashita 2020; Kubo and Yui 2020; Suzuki et al. 2022). Contributing factors include demographic changes and depopulation; growth-oriented housing policies (Baba et al. 2022; Zhang 2020); weak demand and market for existing housing stock in Japan (Baba et al. 2022); emotional and cultural considerations, such as retaining homes with ancestral Buddhist altars (S. Ono et al. 2010); and institutional issues, including tax systems that discourage demolition or offer little incentive for maintenance (Kubo and Mashita 2020). Another persistent challenge is the difficulty in identifying property owners, especially in rural areas. More than half of vacant properties are inherited, and without properly updated registration, municipalities cannot locate or contact the owners. When a house becomes vacant with no one to maintain it, deterioration occurs rapidly, and the longer a house is left vacant, the more difficult and costly it becomes to make it habitable again.

2.3.2 Policy and local responses to vacant houses

Japan's main national policy addressing vacant properties is the 2015 Vacant Houses Special Measures Law (*akiya taisaku tokubetsu sochi hō*, commonly referred to as the Vacant House Law). The law allows local governments to identify vacant or dilapidated properties, issue recommendations and orders to owners, and, if needed, enforce repairs or demolition. In the case that the owner cannot be identified, contacted, or have passed away without a registered successor, municipalities are granted legal grounds to take possession of the property and either demolish it or repurpose it for approved public use.

Despite these legal powers, the law has had limited effect in practice. Local governments face financial, administrative, and moral barriers to demolition. Many

municipalities are reluctant to intervene directly due to prevailing cultural norms regarding property ownership and the belief that one should not interfere with the belongings of others (Takamura 2021). Local officials also express uncertainty about the scope of their authority and emphasize that demolition or compulsory measures can be prohibitively costly. As a result, municipalities generally rely on encouraging or pressuring owners to act voluntarily rather than pursuing formal enforcement (Takamura 2021).

At a local level, municipalities, community groups, and individuals have developed their own strategies to address the growing number of *akiya*. A major response has been the systematic collection and dissemination of information on *akiya* to promote their reuse, often targeting in-migrants as potential users. Because many rural areas do not have real estate agents and even in those that do, many are not interested in dealing with *akiya* due to their low market value (due to low commissions for agents), local actors have set up “*akiya* banks”, which are publicly accessible databases that list *akiya* available for rent or sale. These are usually operated through municipal or regional websites (though I have also met individuals and groups who maintain their own) and vary widely in the number of listings, quality of information, and success in matching properties with users. Other municipal initiatives include housing subsidies to assist in renovation costs, relocation grants, and support programs aimed at helping newcomers settle in.

At present, efforts to deal with *akiya* and associated challenges vary considerably across regions, depending on municipal capacity, demographic conditions, local leadership, and community involvement. Some municipalities have established coordinated systems to address vacancies, while others, often those most affected by depopulations, struggle with limited staff and resources.

2.3.3 Challenges in using vacant houses

With the recent rise in urban-rural migration, demand for vacant houses has increased in rural areas (Takamura 2021). Yet many prospective in-migrants struggle to secure suitable *akiya*, including on islands and regions experiencing sharp population decline and have ample vacant housing stock (Abe and Tani 2023). This creates a paradox: although the number of vacant houses continues to grow, many of them remain inaccessible or unusable.

One of the primary barriers is the difficulty of identifying property owners. Until 2024, it was not mandatory for heirs to register a change in ownership upon inheriting

property. Because there were no major repercussions for not registering, many heirs chose not to update records, especially when the inherited property or land held little market value or were costly to maintain. As a result, municipalities often cannot determine who legally owns vacant properties to pass on their details to interested buyers or renters.

Even if the owners are known, it can be difficult to obtain permission to rent or buy. Owners are sometimes apprehensive and reluctant to allow strangers to use their property, often due to sentimental attachments, fears of misuse, or the burdens of formal rental arrangements. In response, community-based organizations, NPOs, or active individuals, have emerged as intermediaries, helping to mediate between owners and interested users (Takamura 2021). They usually help to connect owners with users who then negotiate and agree on terms of use. While effective in some cases, the approach can be exclusive and selective, for example prioritizing young families over older adults or people who rely on welfare (Takamura 2021).

Legal structures also contribute to limited use of vacant houses. Under current law, to transfer a property to a new owner, the co-owners all need to agree, and each has a right to disagree. This situation has been described through the concept of the “anticommons” (Heller 1998). Heller (1998) coined the phrase “tragedy of the anticommons,” whereby fragmented ownership rights prevent the productive use of a resource. Drawing on the ecologist Garrett Hardin’s phrase “tragedy of the commons,” where overuse and abuse of common resources lead to depletion, Heller’s “tragedy of the anticommons,” in contrast, refers instead to underuse caused by excessive individual control when privatization goes too far to the point of destroying rather than creating wealth (Heller 2013). In Japan, inherited properties with multiple heirs often fall into this category, preventing otherwise usable homes from re-entering the housing market.

Once these legal and administrative hurdles are overcome and access to a vacant house is secured, users face yet another challenge: renovation. Many vacant houses require significant repair, and renovation can be expensive, labor-intensive, and time-consuming. In rural areas, difficulties compound due to the remote or inconvenient access to houses in the countryside, limited access to contractors and skilled labor, and complexities associated with renovating old wooden properties. Nevertheless, growing interest in renovation, particularly among young in-migrants, has led to the emergence of a new renovation culture, which will be discussed in the following section.

2.3.4 The rise in renovation and DIY

As Japan enters a postgrowth era, architects, building companies, and residents have increasingly turned their attention to the existing built environment, in particularly secondhand buildings. Architect and scholar Thomas Daniell (2008, 13) observes that, “though major projects did continue, the pace of new construction drastically slowed. Architecture experimentation for its own sake became more difficult to justify. Adaptive reuse became a pressing necessity rather than a romantic choice.” Adaptive reuse refers to the transformation of existing buildings for new purposes (L. Wong 2016). In Japan, this approach is gaining recognition as a way for residents to participate directly in shaping their living environments and achieving a higher degree of customization.

Policy shifts have also encouraged greater engagement with renovation. A study group from MLIT (2014a) issued guidelines for local governments and real estate companies outlining new contractual forms that support the reuse of vacant properties. One model allows tenants to freely renovate them without having to worry about returning it to its original state upon leaving. This is different to the conventional contract, where tenants are expected to return a property to its original state when they move out.

At the community level, new private initiatives have emerged to support access to renovation skills. Schools and companies such as the Iezukuri Kyōshūjo (house-building training school) in Kochi Prefecture offer workshops that teach DIY and basic carpentry skills, including knowledge in traditionally expert fields such as learning how to make structural upgrades and reinforcements to houses. Similar workshop formats have been adopted elsewhere around the country, bringing together residents and experts to learn about vacant house renovation. Online shopping platforms have further enriched the DIY experience by providing easy access to a wide variety of tools, materials, and support (Morita and Kim 2021). Access to information and know-how through the internet such as online video tutorials and renovation blogs has greatly assisted the sharing of knowledge and broadened participation in renovation among nonprofessionals. Dedicated online services, such as r-toolbox.jp, curate materials, fixtures, and ideas catered specifically to DIY renovation, encouraging users to customize their living spaces.

The rise of renovation activities, particularly through renovation *machizukuri*, has contributed to the formation of another related concept known as “area renovation.” This

term describes the phenomenon that occurs when multiple renovation projects happen simultaneously or in an incremental manner within a certain area over several years. The significance of area renovation lies not only in physical improvements but also the creation of networks of connected people, practices, and projects that collectively transform the character of an entire area over time. Architect Masataka Baba introduced the concept in his book *Area Renovation: Structure and Localization of Change* (Baba et al. 2016), where he explores its potential for community revitalization. Baba runs both a design office, Open-A (short for Open Architecture), as well as a real estate company, Tokyo R Real Estate, which was founded to match converted vacant buildings with prospective tenants and promote the use of secondhand building stock. Beginning in Tokyo's Nihonbashi district, which had many vacant office buildings left over from the 1960s and 1970s, Baba publicized his renovation projects, helping to convey the unique charm and architectural appeal of older buildings.

Baba describes this kind of renovation as “crafty” (*kōsaku teki*), drawing inspiration from Chilean architect Alejandro Aravena, known for participatory housing projects that includes renovation with local people, and the UK collective Assemble, recognized for its hands-on, community-based approach.⁶ Baba argues that rather than relying solely on abstract planning theories, those who use the space should be the ones who create them. This sentiment aligns closely with the rise in DIY approaches and renovation *machizukuri* discussed earlier, reflecting a broader shift toward hands-on, citizen-led placemaking. For area-wide revitalization to occur, Baba et al. (2016) emphasize the need to transition from “point renovation”, referring to individual projects, to area renovation in which multiple interconnected projects collectively uplift the atmosphere of an entire area. Comparable examples overseas include Italy's *albergo diffuso* (scattered hotel) model, in which accommodation is distributed across several restored buildings in a single village (De Montis et al. 2015).

Other studies have further elaborated on the potential of area renovation in revitalizing hollowed-out urban districts (Miyabe 2019; Nakajima et al. 2018). Nakajima et al. (2018), for example, analyzes the work of a social enterprise called Machizu Creative, a community development company active in Matsudo, Chiba Prefecture. Their main project,

⁶ Baba gave a lecture in Japanese titled “Eria renobēshon” [Area renovation] on March 2, 2017, as part of the “Fifth City Vision Lecture,” held by the Mori Memorial Foundation in Tokyo.

“MAD City,” aims to activate the Matsudo, a typical peripheral town 30 minutes northeast of Tokyo facing an increase in vacant properties. The company leases vacant properties at low cost, provides information and support for creatives relocating to the area, and organizes various workshops and social events to activate the local community. Unlike conventional real estate companies, Machizu Creative allows and encourages its tenants to freely renovate properties through DIY without the need to restore them to the original condition.

The rise in building vacancy is both a challenge and an opportunity. Matsumura (2019), tracing the trajectory of postwar housing in Japan, argues that the country has reached an era of “open architecture,” in which vacant buildings serve as a spatial resource that individuals can appropriate freely, outside the traditional constraints of the market. While existing studies on vacant houses have primarily focused on policy and government responses (Kadomatsu et al. 2020) or institutional issues (Kubo and Yui 2020), fewer empirical studies have examined how renovation is carried out by citizens on the ground, particularly in rural areas. As housing remains one of the key hurdles to long-term settlement, rural in-migrants are emerging as central actors in this process. Their approaches to renovation, and the networks they form through these practices, offer valuable insight into how community-led revitalization unfolds in areas grappling with demographic decline.

2.4 Chapter summary

In this chapter, I have examined the literature on several interconnected themes of interest: rural revitalization, rural mobilities (including the *den-en kaiki* movement), and placemaking (including *machizukuri* and vacant house renovation). Existing research on *den-en kaiki* has largely focused on capturing the scale of the phenomenon through quantitative data, with relatively few studies offering qualitative insights based on empirical fieldwork. Because *den-en kaiki* is a multifaceted process, I follow Odagiri’s (2017) call to move beyond assessing it solely in numerical terms, given that population recovery is unlikely, and instead investigate in-migrants as individuals who engage with rural areas in diverse and meaningful ways. This approach also responds to international findings showing that policies promoting rural in-migration often fail when there is limited understanding of who the people relocating really are, including their motivations, characteristics, and socio-economic profiles (Bjerke and Mellander 2017; Buchenrieder et al. 2020).

Unlike lifestyle migration trends observed in other countries, rural in-migrants in Japan are frequently expected to contribute to community revitalization rather than simply consume rural goods and services. However, the degree of their commitment and contribution varies widely, underscoring the need for closer examination of their backgrounds, motivations and activities after the move. The first part of my study therefore aims to clarify the diverse mobilities and motivations of rural in-migrants and illuminate how these shape their engagements with place.

A second gap revealed by the literature concerns how in-migrants contribute to placemaking practices in the countryside. Integral to this placemaking process are the material changes and improvements newcomers make to their living environments that are unique to rural areas. Many young in-migrants bring new ideas, skills, capital, and forms of creativity from their time in cities, often establishing small businesses such as shops, guesthouses and cafes in their new rural surroundings. These activities contribute to socio-spatial transformation and frequently involve the reuse of existing resources, most notably vacant houses and buildings. Yet few existing studies examine both the social and spatial implications of the *den-en kaiki* movement through the lens of placemaking. To address this gap, I focus on how rural in-migrants reshape their surroundings through renovation and reuse, and how such projects are reframing rural areas—once seen as backwards and lacking resources—as sites of possibility and experimentation.

To examine these issues, I conducted 15 months of in-person fieldwork on a group of depopulating islands that have recently attracted a steady stream of new in-migrants. The next chapter outlines the research set-up and field site.

Chapter 3: Research set-up

3.1 Project background

During my first two years in Japan, I took intensive Japanese lessons and visited a wide range of towns and villages to observe examples of rural revitalization firsthand. These visits formed the exploratory phase of my research, which was largely inductive and aimed at developing an initial understanding of current conditions in rural Japan. As Okada (2022) notes, identifying particularities, local specificities, and commonalities of field sites cannot be accomplished through desk research alone; it requires visiting and engaging with concrete, lived environments.

The areas I visited during this initial phase revealed diverse revitalization strategies. The villages in Niigata Prefecture that are part of the Echigo-Tsumari Art Triennale and the “art islands” that are part of the Setouchi Triennale in Kagawa Prefecture both adopt art tourism as its key strategy by inviting well-known artists and architects to create site-specific installations, museums, and community projects that attract a large number of visitors. In Tokushima, the small mountain town of Kamiyama has gained recognition for its IT-based migration strategy, offering high-speed internet and affordable workspaces in renovated buildings to attract remote workers, creatives, and entrepreneurs. The smallest community I visited was Kiwanosato in Yamaguchi Prefecture, where the UK-based art institution Grizedale Arts hosted education retreats focused on food, cooking, and crafts.

Together, these visits highlighted the diversity of revitalization strategies across Japan yet also shared two common features: 1) the presence of young rural in-migrants who had relocated to pursue new forms of work and life; and 2) an abundance of vacant houses being converted into new uses. Another observation was the rising number of newcomers who were launching small businesses be it new shops, cafés, shared offices, workshops, studios, guest accommodation and so on, often housed in renovated *akiya*. These recurring observations shaped the formulation of the two key research questions:

1. Who are the young rural in-migrants choosing to live in depopulating and shrinking communities?
2. How are they reshaping and transforming their living environment through the process of vacant house renovation?

To investigate these questions, I sought a suitable field site that would allow sustained immersion in a single locality so that I could embed myself in the community. In November 2019, I visited the town of Onomichi in Hiroshima Prefecture, widely known for its vacant house renovation movement. During this trip, I cycled the Shimanami Kaidō and visited several islands dotted between Onomichi and Imabari city.

Throughout Onomichi and the surrounding islands, I met young in-migrants who were working in the guesthouses and hotels I stayed in or running small businesses such as cafés and shops, often in formally vacant properties that they had renovated themselves. One example of renovation came from a small curry shop run out of a former *kura*, a traditional storage shed once used for mandarins (Figure 3.1). Similar cases of DIY renovation were common in the area, reflecting a sizeable newcomer community actively involved in repurposing vacant houses and contributing to the area's growing tourism economy.

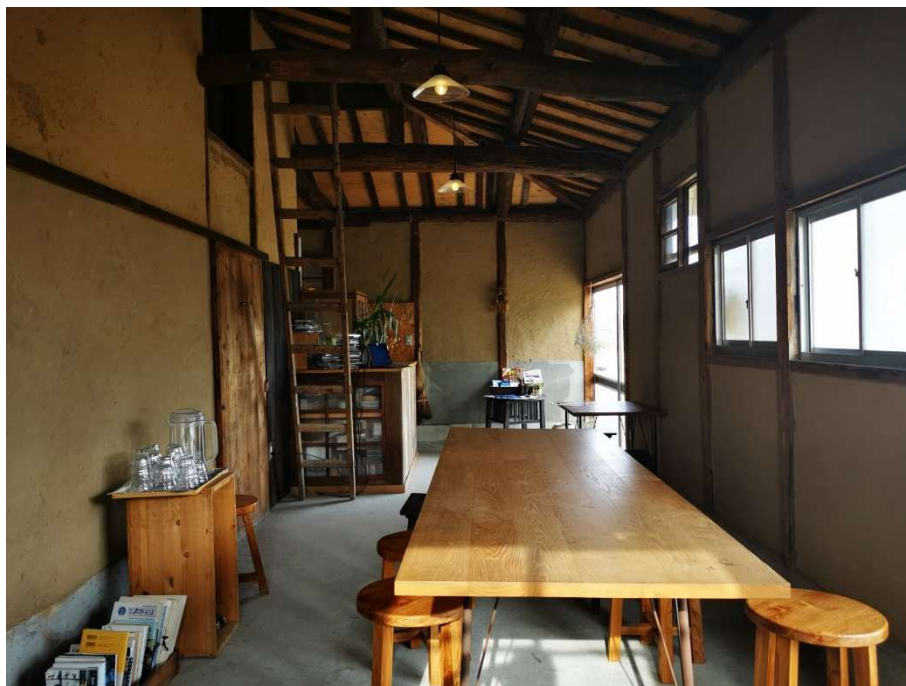


Figure 3.1. A citrus storage shed that has been renovated into a small café. Photo by author, November 11, 2019.

After returning to Tokyo and then to my home country for the winter break in February 2020, the outbreak of COVID-19 rapidly escalated into a global pandemic. International travel was soon restricted, and for the remainder of 2020 I was unable to return to Japan. As a result, I shifted to online fieldwork. I revisited the contacts I had made from the recent trip to Onomichi and the surrounding islands, many of whom I had connected with

on social media and begun conducting interviews remotely from March to December 2020. These were carried out in three formats: email correspondence, video calls via Zoom, and over the phone. Two native Japanese-speaking students assisted me by translating an introductory letter outlining my research aims and questions and by providing live interpretation during the interviews. All interviews were conducted with prior consent and, where permitted, recorded.

Although unplanned, this period of online fieldwork and interviews allowed me to deepen and expand my networks in the Shimanami region while continuing to improve my Japanese language ability. By the time I returned to Japan in January 2021 to resume in-person fieldwork, I had reached a conversational level that enabled me to conduct informal interviews independently and translate recordings myself.

This hybrid approach of following networks both online and offline allowed me to easily keep in contact with people I met. Through social media, I could observe their daily activities, business updates, and local events in real time, gaining an additional layer of insight into their lives. My fieldwork approach differs from earlier studies conducted before the widespread use of social media. For example, Culter's (1999) research on the former prosperous coal-mining city of Yubari relied on top-down access to informants mediated through official introductions by Yubari officials and supervised meetings with city hall staff. In contrast, Kingsbury (2019) adopts more informal fieldwork methods, such as endurance running, to establish rapport with rural residents. As Kingsbury (2019, 57) argues, "there is a need to revisit the rural with the newer methods and theoretical underpinnings garnered by studying urban Japan over the last 40 years." My research aligns with this call by combining digital ethnography with traditional fieldwork.

When I returned to the islands, I made use of both my online and offline networks to establish contact with potential interlocutors. I maintained an active Instagram account that served both as a visual diary supplementing my field notes and as a public-facing profile that introduced me to other in-migrants. On my Instagram profile, I wrote in Japanese that I was a student "researching architecture, rural revitalization, and *machizukuri*." Posts documenting my daily life, places I have visited, and people I met offered others a sense of who I was and provided an accessible way to initiate conversation. About one-third of my interlocutors first connected with me through social media before we met in person at local events or at their workplaces. I soon found that the islands had a tight-knit in-migrant community, and mutual

friends or acquaintances frequently helped break the ice, allowing conversations to unfold in a relaxed and natural manner.

3.2 The field site

Japan has approximately 7,000 islands, including around 400 inhabited remote islands. These exclude the five main islands of Honshu, Hokkaido, Kyushu, Shikoku, and Okinawa, which together are commonly referred to as “the mainland.” All other islands are classified as *ritō* (remote islands). According to the 2015 Population Census of Japan, just over one million people live on remote islands, representing less than 1% of the national population (Miyauchi and Suyama 2022). Remote island communities are among the regions most severely affected by depopulation.

Historically, government policies sought to address the underdevelopment of remote islands—particularly infrastructural disparities—through the enactment of the Ritō Shinko-hō (Remote Island Development Act) in 1953 (Kuwahara 2012). These measures aimed to reduce the sense of being “left behind” that many remote islands experienced during Japan’s postwar economic boom. However, early development initiatives were often underfunded and did not reverse out-migration (Kakiuchi and Hasegawa 1979). Despite decades of government investment intended to improve transportation, public services, and economic opportunities, population decline and rapid aging of residents have continued. The MLIT (2018) notes that remote islands included in the Act experienced an average population decline of nearly 60% between 1955 and 2010.

The chosen field site is a group of islands located along the border of Hiroshima and Ehime Prefectures, which I refer to collectively as “the islands” (Figure 3.2). Their size and population vary, ranging from around 400 people (Sashima) to over 20,000 (Innoshima) for the larger islands. The region enjoys a warm, temperate climate with relatively light rainfall and has historically supported agriculture, fishing and seaweed production. Citrus farming, particularly *mikan* (mandarins) was once the dominant industry that secured the livelihood of many farming households until the 1970s, when overproduction and the liberalization of fruit imports caused prices to collapse. Citrus prices have remained stagnant since the 1990s, and as farmers age with few successors willing to take over, abandoned orchards have become increasingly common (Sukeshige 2004). Shipbuilding also had a significant presence on

some islands but has declined since the 1970s due to recession, decreased domestic demand, and growing international competition from South Korea and China.

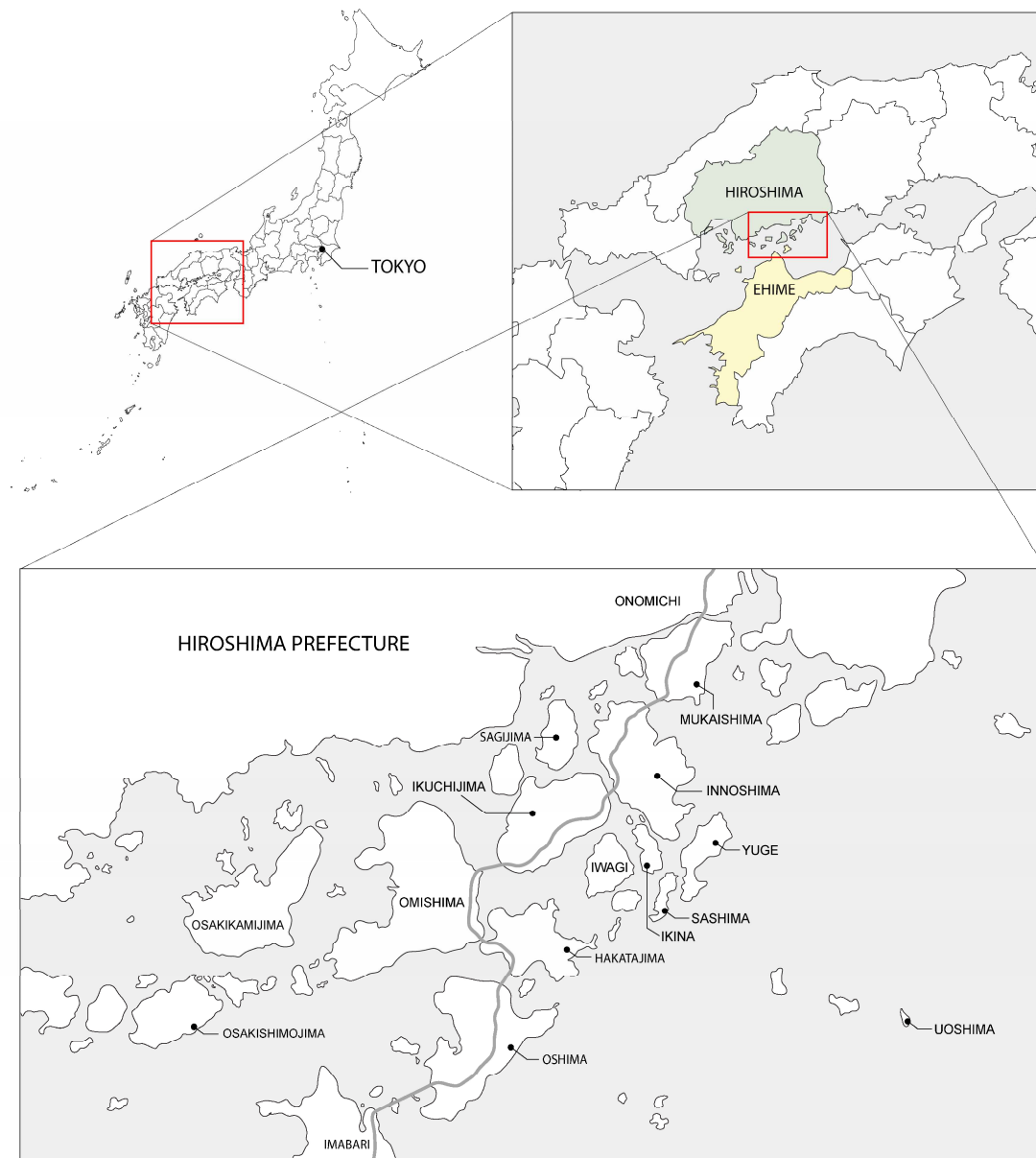


Figure 3.2. Map of field site capturing towns and islands part of the study.

Although remote islands in Japan are among the worst affected by depopulation decline due to their peripheral position, many also hold the potential to become tourist destinations (Funck 2020). Tourism in the region has grown steadily since the completion of the Shimanami Kaidō in 1999, which introduced a scenic cycling route connecting several islands by a series of bridges. Outdoor activities such as camping, fishing, and sailing have

further boosted tourism numbers in recent years. Local municipalities have actively leveraged this tourism attention as a pathway to migration, promoting the islands as attractive places to live. The number of in-migrants has steadily flowed into the island, as evidenced by the increase in new shops and other small businesses. Many islands now employ dedicated staff, including government-funded Chiiki Okoshi Kyōryokutai (COKT) members, to provide migration consultations and attend migration fairs to promote their island to potential newcomers.

3.3 Finding and following networks

As with selecting the field site, identifying my interlocutors was also a matter of following networks (Bestor et al. 2003). From January 2021 to April 2022, I resided on Sashima island, part of Kamijima town, to conduct fieldwork. During my initial visit in November 2019, I had already made several key connections in person. These contacts became the starting point for my online interviews in 2020, which expanded through a snowball sampling process supplemented by social media outreach. Conducted remotely during the pandemic, these interviews enabled me to learn about each interlocutor's background, business activities, motivations for moving, and their experiences of living on a remote island during COVID-19.

Over 30 years earlier, Junko Goto's (1993) doctoral dissertation raised questions about the meaning of "rural" and rural identity, noting that terms such as "rural locality" and "rural revitalization" depend on shifting and contested understandings. By the time of my study, the boundaries between "urban" and "rural" had become increasingly hybrid and relative. Many of my interlocutors describe how towns like Onomichi were considered *inaka* (rural) by people from Tokyo, yet from the perspective of residents on surrounding remote islands, Onomichi was regarded as the nearest "city" and a major hub. Space, therefore, was perceived less as fixed geography and more as a field of relationships shaped by and has become a product of "social, cultural, political, and economic relations" (Leander and McKim 2003, 218). I adopt Madden's (2017, 52) conceptualization of ethnographic fields as part geographical, part social, and part mental constructs:

The conceptualisation of the interrogative boundary, that is to say the questions which impel the ethnographer, overarch geographic considerations and tie diffuse, loose, separate, mobile or distant places together into a single ethnographic field of enquiry.

Although the majority of data was collected during in-person fieldwork, my ethnographic field was not bound to the island I stayed on. After COVID-19 precautions subsided in mid-2021, I started to visit neighboring islands for markets, festivals, and social gatherings, as well as to support the businesses of my interlocutors including shops, guesthouses, cafés, and small creative enterprises. I also actively sought out *akiya* projects, especially those that were still ongoing, and regularly made trips to volunteer on renovation sites. I ensured that I adhered to the required safety measures at the time, including mask-wearing and social-distancing.

The search for a place to stay was also a case of following networks. On the island I resided on, there were no real estate agents. Most newcomers either registered their interest to rent or buy a house through the town-managed *akiya* bank, or by word of mouth. Through a café owner who was a long-term resident, I was introduced to three available properties. Two were vacant but were not listed on the *akiya* bank, and another was a second residence for a woman who usually lived outside of the islands but visited regularly. One of the vacant properties was a single-story house with four large tatami-style rooms just meters away from the beach, with a rent of 30,000, which came down to 25,000 yen when I said I was a student. Although the rental price was affordable, the house was fully furnished with previous residents' belongings, and felt too large for one person. After discussing alternatives such as homestays with friends and acquaintances, it was suggested that I contact a local guesthouse.

This turned out to be an ideal option. Staying at the guesthouse meant I did not need to purchase any furniture and was able to talk regularly with the two managers, both in-migrants themselves who had moved from outside the island to work for the guesthouse. During my first month there, I encountered a woman in her mid-20s who was staying temporarily as a “helper” (*herupā-san*), assisting with chores such as cleaning the house and receiving guests in exchange for food and board. She had grown up in a mountainous region over six hours away and had always wanted to experience island-living. After visiting as a tourist and befriending the managers, she had returned to stay for a longer stay of one month. We soon became friends and started to hang out and meet other young people on the island, including other in-migrants such as revitalization officers in the COKT program, town hall staff, and entrepreneurs who had started businesses in farming, hospitality, tourism, and other creative industries. After she left, the guesthouse owner offered me the helper position.

I ended up being a helper at the guesthouse for the duration of my fieldwork. Living and working part-time at the guesthouse proved invaluable for building trust, strengthening relationships, and integrating into the local community. When residents asked where I lived, the mention of the guesthouse created an immediate sense of familiarity and association with the two managers, who were well known by the small community. My year there allowed me to meet a broad range of visitors, tourists, returning family members, friends of residents, and people on “workcations.” I often invited my friends and interlocutors to guesthouse events, gatherings, meals and several interviews were also carried out there in addition to daily conversations. Residents often stopped by to bring vegetables or chat, providing natural opportunities for conversation and deepening my presence as a community member as well as researcher.

3.4 Doing ethnography

To understand more deeply the lives, values, and everyday experiences of rural in-migrants, long-term ethnographic fieldwork offered deeper insights that could not be gained from one-off interviews or surveys. The method of “doing ethnography” draws on anthropology and social sciences. Madden (2017) provides three key aspects when it comes to doing ethnography: talking to people, being with people, and looking at people. This method is commonly referred to as participant observation. While contemporary ethnography encompasses a wider approach beyond a singular methodology, participant observation remains at the core of ethnography where to know other humans, the ethnographer “do as others do, live with others, eat, work and experience the same daily patterns as others (Madden 2017, 16). My 15 months of in-person ethnographic fieldwork align with traditional ethnography practice, which typically spans 12 to 18 months to allow enough time to record “thick descriptions” (Geertz 1973), and the development of sustained relationships.

Long-term fieldwork has enabled several benefits. First, it gave me time to build rapport and get to know my informants on a deeper level, allowing for multiple interviews and follow-up conversations. As Hendry (1998, 6) argues, a benefit of conducting ethnographic fieldwork by operating at the grassroots level is the long periods spent with the same people to “distinguish what people do from what they say they do, and what they should do.” Second, experiencing the full cycle of seasons revealed lifestyles and occupations changed across the year. I observed that many jobs in rural areas, such as agriculture, fishing, and tourism, shifted in intensity throughout the year. Third, being in the field for an extended

length of time allowed me to make repeat visits to key sites. For example, in one of my case studies of a vacant house renovation project in Onomichi, I was able to attend monthly building workshops for an entire year, documenting the project's development over time. Finally, being embedded in the local community enabled me to build strong relationships with the town staff, including the mayor. The municipality supported my research by offering town-owned public facilities for exhibitions I curated in Kamijima and Onomichi, which facilitated further exchange with residents through informal conversation, a public talk event, and the chance to gather another round of data through surveys with exhibition attendees. The survey results and students' work were presented back to the town as a way to give back to the community.

As a trained architect drawing on anthropological methods, I draw on Bernard Rudofsky's (1964) idea of studying "architecture without architects" particularly relevant to vacant house renovation. Rudofsky's call to examine informal and vernacular architecture as a reflection of diverse cultures resonates with anthropologist's long-standing interest in built environments as expression of cultural meaning and social relations. Architects are becoming increasingly interested in adopting methods such as ethnographic fieldwork and qualitative interviews as part of design research (Stender 2017). Stender (2017, 33) emphasizes that borrowing methods alone is insufficient; architects must engage in theoretical and reflexive analyses to understand the social contexts shaping the built environment:

A key element in what architects can learn from anthropologists is thus to understand local social contexts through exploratory and self-reflective approaches combining methods for collecting data with theoretically informed ways of critically analyzing the data.

Stender (2017, 31) proposal of "architectural anthropology" underscores the value of cross-disciplinary approaches to "reflect critically on the social relations and meanings materialized in our built surroundings." This approach has guided my analysis by connecting the people being studied (rural in-migrants) and the material transformations (vacant house renovations) they undertake for a more holistic understanding of the social context and processes in which they emerge.

Thus, my data collection adopts a mixed methods approach comprising informal interactions online and in person interactions, semi-structured recorded and written

interviews, questionnaires, and on-site participant observation. I participated in community events such as rice-planting, miso-making, cooking workshops, town markets, and music festivals, many of which were organized by in-migrants themselves. For the study on vacant house renovation, I volunteered on-site to observe work practices directly. Much of this engagement constituted what Bestor et al. (2003) call “inquisitive observation” or simply “hanging out.” While I kept regular field notes and jotted down informal conversations, I also conducted longer, semi-structured interviews throughout the research process. These interviews were not designed to be representative but serve as in-depth insights into individuals that I know I had come to know and trust. In total, I conducted 62 semi-structured interviews. Interviews were conducted in English or Japanese (the majority in Japanese), lasted one to two hours, and took place in various settings around the islands. Most participants are anonymized with pseudonyms. However, individuals who are publicly identifiable in their professional roles and who consented to attribution are referred to by their real names.

3.5 Positionality

I acknowledge that bias-free research is not possible, and I have sought to remain reflexive about how my positionality and perspectives may impact the data gathered and analyzed. My analysis is inevitably influenced by my personal, cultural, and academic background. During fieldwork, I was a graduate female student from Australia studying at a private university in Tokyo. Having lived in multiple countries before coming to Japan (China, New Zealand, Australia, Netherlands, and the US) helped me relate to young in-migrants who also experienced living abroad. This facilitated rapport, particularly with interlocutors who spoke some English, given that my Japanese was at an intermediate level. As a result, it was often easier to connect with a subset of in-migrants who were relatively well-educated, mobile, and comfortable in navigating cross-cultural environments which might be considered a more “elite” group of newcomers.

Following Katz’s (1994, 67) discussion of “spaces of betweenness,” my fieldwork blurred the boundaries between “home” and “field.” After moving from Australia to Tokyo, and later from Tokyo to the islands, the islands became both my place of residence and my research site. Over the months, the islands became my second home as I grew to become more familiar with everyday island life and made friends with locals who introduced me to their friends and acquaintances. Locals would often introduce me from the position of a

friend first and then explain that I was a graduate student from overseas interested in learning about rural issues such as urban-rural migration, revitalization, and vacant house renovation.

My positionality also shifted during the fieldwork. At first, I was clearly an outsider: a foreign researcher new to the community. Over time, however, I came to be regarded as an in-migrant myself. I changed my registration and became an islander officially. My experiences resembled I-turners, people who are not originally from the area, as opposed to U-turners, who are former residents returning to their hometown after living in the city. Like many I-turners, I navigated unfamiliar networks as I had no previous connections to the town and experienced similar challenges and benefits that were different to U-turners who have preexisting networks and ties to the island. As I became more embedded in the community, taking up work at the guesthouse and making friends, I was considered more of an insider than newer in-migrants who moved to the area after me. Working at the guesthouse and participating in community life strengthened my position as an insider, making it easier to conduct interviews and observe daily practices.

3.6 Chapter summary

The research set-up involved one year of exploratory travel to assess potential fieldwork sites, followed by a year of online fieldwork due to the COVID-19 pandemic restricting travel. Although unplanned, the year away from Japan proved beneficial: it enabled me to spend time to build rapport with potential interlocutors I had met during the initial visit just before the pandemic, and online interviews offered early insight into the diversity of young in-migrants living on the islands. Several interlocutors introduced me to additional in-migrants, strengthening my networks and informing my decision to select the islands as the field site. Through one of these online interviews, I became acquainted with a guesthouse owner who eventually offered me a place to stay for the duration of the fieldwork.

Once on the island, I continued to follow networks through both online and offline approaches. My positionality shifted over time as I became embedded within the community as a newcomer then a helper at the local guesthouse, and eventually a familiar face in local social circles. The guesthouse proved to be a fruitful place to meet people on the island, allowing me to meet other in-migrants, long-term residents, and visitors through shared meals, events, and everyday interaction. Over the course of the fieldwork, I conducted 62 interviews: 58 with young in-migrants and four part of the relationship population. These

interviews, combined with participant observation and informal interaction, form the empirical basis of the following chapters.

The first step of the research was to understand who these young in-migrants were and why they had chosen to relocate to a group of depopulating islands after living in cities. Many of the narratives I present in the following chapters come from individuals with whom I had multiple interactions with and spent time together—people whose homes, workplaces, and everyday routines I came to know closely through sustained engagement.

Chapter 4: Return to the countryside

In this chapter, I shed light on the diverse profiles of rural in-migrants I have encountered. Building on the demographic, policy, and theoretical context outlined in Chapter 2 and the methodological approach described in Chapter 3, this chapter turns to the lived experiences of young people who have relocated to rural Japan. Here, I examine the diverse backgrounds of rural in-migrants and the reasons they chose to move to the countryside, offering an empirical foundation for understanding the *den-en kaiki* movement through the voices and trajectories of those shaping it.

During the 15 months of fieldwork, I conducted 58 interviews with young rural in-migrants in their 20s to 40s. Of these, 26 were female and 32 were male; 17 were in their 20s, 30 were in their 30s, and 11 were in their 40s at the time of the interview. 14 were U-turners returning to their home islands, 41 were I-turners with no prior ties to the region, and 4 were part of the *kankei jinkō*, who are regular visitors or maintained part-time residence but were not formally registered as island residents. Four interlocutors belonged to the earliest cohort of newcomers who arrived around a decade ago, shortly after the 2011 Great East Japan Earthquake. Most had moved in the last five years, and four arrived after the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020, with the most recent move occurring in March 2022.

My in-person fieldwork began when I arrived on the islands in the winter of 2021. After settling into a local guesthouse (referred to here as “S Guesthouse”), I reconnected with several individuals I had met from my first visit in 2019. One was Mai, an I-turner who had moved to the islands 10 years ago in her 20s. Shortly after my two-week quarantine, Mai visited S Guesthouse and offered to show me around. We walked to her *hatake* (field for growing crops) that she rented to grow rice and seasonal vegetables. On the way, we stopped by the beach, where Mai pointed out a cluster of edible plants growing in the sand (Figure 4.1). One of these edibles “weeds” was a tiny white Chinese radish (*daikon*). I had seen many locals on the island grow this radish in their fields, which was usually around 30cm long. Mai sensed my excitement and laughed saying she had reacted the same way when she first arrived on the islands. Local women on the island had taught her about edible wild plants and flowers known as *tsumina*, which she now forages on her daily walks.



Figure 4.1. A tiny *daikon* foraged on the beach (left), and Mai foraging for edible weeds on the beach (right). Photo by author, January 26, 2021.

Mai showed me around her *hatake* which immediately stood out from the other local fields I had seen around the island (Figure 4.2). Her plot was not as neat; the soil was hardly visible and hidden beneath a cover of weeds. Mai told me her farm was based on natural farming methods inspired by Masanobu Fukuoka, rejecting the use of pesticides, chemical fertilizers, ploughing, and even weeding in favor of observing natural processes. Mai and her husband grow all their vegetables this way, which yields a smaller crop but enough to deliver organic vegetables to a small group of customers every month. They also run farm tours, cooking workshops, and a farm-stay program where people can come and stay with them to learn about farming and cooking firsthand. Two years after starting the farm, Mai opened a small café in front of their house. The café is open three days a week, featuring the seasonal vegetables they grow.

A few weeks later after our walk, Mai invited me to her home for dinner. Over a homemade meal prepared from her own harvest, she shared more about her journey to the island, the values guide her life, and the motivation behind her move. Her story, rooted in experimentation, ecological sensibilities, and a desire for community, echoed many of the themes that emerged across the interviews in this chapter.



Figure 4.2. Mai's *hatake*, which is based on natural farming methods (left), compared to a typical local *hatake* (right). Photo by author, January 26, 2021.

4.1 The contemporary *hyakushō*

4.1.1 Tokyo office worker turned organic farmer

Both Mai and her husband were originally from a prefecture outside of Tokyo. Mai had moved to Tokyo for university and eventually went on to work at a marketing company. Although the job was stable and well paid, it was also demanding; long hours and frequent overtime left Mai with little time for cooking or personal life. As Mai and her husband approached the end of their 20s, they began to question whether this lifestyle was sustainable. The 2011 Great East Japan Earthquake was a trigger for Mai who had witnessed the breaking down of essential services, including food chain supplies, which prompted her to reconsider how she wanted to live and seek a more self-sufficient way of life.

Not knowing where to go or where to start, Mai started researching rural migration and came across the government-sponsored COKT program. Her application was successful, and she and her husband moved to Yuge island (officially Yugesshima but commonly referred to as Yuge by locals) in Kamijima town at the end of 2011. Upon arrival, they rented a 100-year-old *akiya* and renovated it with the help of locals who welcomed them into the small community. At the same time, Mai started to cultivate a small vegetable garden alongside her

COKT duties, learning subsistence farming practices common among long-term island residents. After graduating from the three-year program, Mai and her husband rented a larger plot of land on the island, which became the organic farm that they now run together. Mai explains on her website:

*When I first came to the island, I didn't intend to become a farmer, but the tiny field I started for my vegetable garden gave me an opportunity. I started to think about food, seeds, nature, and the social environment that surrounds it, and I decided that I wanted to live as a *hyakushō* [hyakushō toshite ikite ikitai].*

The term *hyakushō*, which is often translated today as “farmer” or “peasant”, has a deeper historical meaning. It is an old term that originally referred to the common people, who were primarily peasants in pre-modern times, whose livelihoods depended on a wide range of agricultural and craft skills to sustain themselves. The word *hyakushō* literally means “100 tasks” which referred to the diverse skills and knowledge that villagers possessed in the past embodying a multi-skilled way of living: building and fixing houses, making clothing, and other crafts required for daily life. With the postwar modernization of agriculture through heavy machinery, pesticides, and chemical fertilizers, the term acquired negative connotations associated with being backwards, poor, or outdated. In contemporary society, *hyakushō* is regarded as a politically incorrect term and rarely used officially, with alternatives such as *nōka* or *nōmin* considered more appropriate.

Mai, however, embraces the term to describe the kind of life she hopes to lead. She distinguishes herself from the conventional *nōka*, who farms professionally and is driven by production and profit. Instead, she aspires to be a modern-day *hyakushō* who takes on various roles in pursuit of a fulfilling and self-sufficient life. Mai and her husband do not employ any staff and manage the farm and café themselves. They intentionally keep their customer base small, “We know we cannot grow enough for 100 customers; we are happy to keep the number of our customers low.” In addition to vegetable box subscriptions, Mai opens her café three days a week, runs an accommodation business, and organizes events and classes revolving around food and farming. She also participates in community life, volunteers to work with local school children once a week and joins nonpaid village activities such as beach cleaning and local meetings. Her days involve a shifting blend of farming, hospitality, teaching, and social life, which together fits into her understanding of contemporary *hyakushō* living. She credits her background in marketing for helping her launch and promote

her small businesses. Mai tells me her work and life are blended as she sees all the different activities she does as part of her life work.

4.1.2 Part-time English teacher, part-time farmer

Joe, originally from the United States, also exemplifies the contemporary *hyakushō* lifestyle, though his path to farming was unplanned. He first came to Japan as an English teacher through the JET program and was posted to Onomichi, just months after the 2011 Great East Japan Earthquake. At the time, a major concern for Joe was food safety, especially since Joe could not yet read Japanese. Through a neighbor, he was introduced to a small property with land on Mukaishima island and started to learn how to farm from locals supplemented by self-study through books and YouTube videos on regenerative agriculture.

Like Mai, a key inspiration for Joe was Masanobu Fukuoka's 1975 book *Wara ippon no kakumei* (*The One Straw Revolution*), which advocated natural, no-till farming methods. Joe was also impressed by his neighbors, many in their 80s, who grew more than 20 types of vegetables for household consumption. They became informal mentors where Joe would often go over to visit and have tea when he had questions, such as the best time to plant certain vegetables. Over time, Joe started to introduce a wider variety of vegetables and incorporated animals including chickens, ducks, and sheep on his farm. It was a challenging experience at first:

I didn't have much experience or money to buy tools and equipment. At the start, we did everything by hand, which was intense but also a great learning experience. My English teacher friends would come and volunteer to help, as they were interested in getting outside and learning about growing food, but I was just doing it without much knowledge. I learned through books and neighbors coming around teaching me how to prune things or how to do things, which was really the only guide I had on how to grow food.

Although Joe initially intended to stay in Japan only a few years before moving elsewhere, he has now lived on the island for more than a decade. In 2017, he and his partner purchased an abandoned citrus orchard and slowly expanded their farm. Most of their produce consists of vegetables, which Joe sells online through Tabe Choku (online sales platform in Japan) and at monthly pop-up markets outside the islands. Like Mai, Joe fits the contemporary *hyakushō* mode: beyond farming, he runs farm tours, holds educational

workshops (including for local preschoolers), undertakes small-scale renovation projects such as converting an old citrus storage shed into a habitable space, and continues part-time English teaching to maintain a stable stream of income to fund his future goal of expanding the farm to include a bar and guest accommodation.

Joe also experiences the challenges of balancing multiple roles. At times Joe feels unmotivated and stressed by the responsibilities of running the farm while also having to manage his teaching job. The temperate island climate allows him to grow vegetables through late summer, but this extended season can also lead to exhaustion. One year, he said he desperately wanted to escape from his responsibilities and had neglected the farm for a few weeks, causing it to spin wildly out of control. Other unpredictable events such as typhoons, wild boar damage, and injuries can further complicate the already demanding workload. Joe and his partner do about 70–80% of the labor, helped occasionally by volunteers and friends including those from WWOOF (Worldwide Opportunities on Organic Farms). His struggle to maintain work–life balance, explored more fully in the next chapter, highlights the difficulty of sustaining a livelihood through a patchwork of roles while aspiring to “live off the land.”

4.1.3 Redefining the *hyakushō* in the twenty-first century

Previous studies have noted that the term *hyakushō* has seen a resurgence among newcomers to rural areas. Many are drawn to the positive attributes associated with the traditional *hyakushō*, including self-sufficiency and resilience, and have adopted the term to describe their own aspirations and lifestyle (Ito 2015; McGreevy 2012). The trend recalls what Knight (2003, 267) refers to as “rural resettlement,” a movement that emerged across industrial societies from the 1970s onward, characterized by the “migration to the countryside of idealistic urbanites to enact a new way of life, usually centered on farming. With its emphasis on recovering a connection to land and nature, this migration expresses opposition to the dominant values of the larger urban-industrial society.” Knight’s ethnographic study in the 1980s and 1990s showed that newcomers were already intentionally invoking *hyakushō* as a lifestyle ideal, taking pride in cultivating a simpler, land-based way of life. In this context, *hyakushō* became a counter-identity to the salaried worker in the city which an increasing number of the urban middle class wished to escape from (Knight 2003).

Mai and Joe both cited the 2011 Great East Japan Earthquake as a key turning point that prompted them to settle on the islands sooner rather than later. Mai experienced food

shortages in Tokyo after the disaster, while Joe was worried about contamination and the reliability of the food supply. Though neither had prior experience in farming, they gradually learned through observation and guidance from island residents who had practiced subsistence farming throughout their lives. I also met other young farmers who had completed professional apprenticeships and government-run agricultural training programs before becoming “professional” farmers selling their produce to the Japan Agricultural Cooperative (JA), a system that typically requires larger-scale production. In contrast to JA farmers, Mai and Joe intentionally keep their operations small, do not usually hire any staff, and avoid fertilizers or pesticides. As a result, both need to pursue additional income streams—Mai through her café and cooking workshops, Joe through English teaching—to sustain their livelihoods.

A concept closely tied to this desire to “live with the land” while pursuing other activities is *han-nō*, *han-X* (half-farmer, half-X), popularized by Naoki Shiomi in the mid-1990s (see Shiomi 2008). Shiomi came up with the concept after the 1995 Great Hanshin-Awaji Earthquake when he was 30 years old. Originally from the rural community of Ayabe in Kyoto, Shiomi made an I-turn back to his hometown and started to practice a half-farmer, half-X lifestyle. He found that he was more content when practicing small-scale farming alongside various other forms of meaningful work, even though he was making less money than he had while working in a company. In his book, Shiomi outlines his vision for people to combine subsistence farming with a personal “X,” a passion or vocation that brings purpose, fulfillment and also generates a small income. As seen in Mai’s case, “X” can take the form of multiple roles, including running a café, hosting workshops, and operating accommodation.

In my fieldwork, I also met others who described themselves as *hyakushō* even though they were not necessarily engaged in farming. One I-turner, for example, held seven different jobs: helping at a café he runs with his wife on the weekends, working part-time as a security guard, maintaining a campsite, driving a community bus, trimming trees, and harvesting seaweed in the winter. While he rarely had a full day off, he preferred this working style because other than the café and bus driving, the other jobs offered flexibility which enabled him to manage his own time. For him, juggling multiple jobs allowed him to fulfil his wish of living more freely (*jiyū ni kurashitai*) while earning enough money to support his young family.

The *hyakushō* lifestyle was not limited to people in rural areas. At a ramen shop in Onomichi, I met a young man from Tokyo who frequently traveled to rural areas. He was in Onomichi to meet a friend and expand his network, hoping to participate in local events where he could sell his handmade curry. Working as a hairdresser in central Tokyo, he traveled back to the salon when clients booked appointments but otherwise spent his time cooking and selling curry at offices and events around Japan. He also has various other ventures, including designing and producing sweaters and merchandise for sale. When I asked what he did for a living, he used the word *hyakushō* not because he was engaged in farming, but because the term best captured his multi-skilled, flexible, and self-directed lifestyle that was not based on a single profession.

These examples illustrate how the contemporary *hyakushō* has expanded beyond farming and points to a broader rethinking of livelihood in twenty-first-century Japan. Managing multiple small jobs allows one to diversify income streams, acquire a broader range of skills, and widen one's social networks. On the islands where jobs may be limited or seasonal, it was common for in-migrants to combine multiple jobs throughout the year, such as a guesthouse owner who also worked as a fisherman in winter when tourism slowed down. However, not all in-migrants fit the *hyakushō* model or choose to spend most of their time working. The next section introduces a different category of in-migrants I encountered who are seeking to “escape” urban life. Whether temporary or more permanently, these individuals are not necessarily drawn to rural living itself but see the countryside as an alternative to the pressures of city life.

4.2 The “good life” or an escape from the city?

The term *kaihō* (freedom, release, or liberation) was used by several in-migrants I interviewed to describe the autonomy they longed for when moving to the countryside. Many felt that urban life, especially Tokyo, forced them to rely on money, conform to workplace norms, and participate in consumer-driven lifestyles that left little room for personal agency. Changing one's environment was therefore seen as necessary to distance oneself from unfulfilling work and the consumer culture prevalent in cities.

A young engineering graduate told me how many of his classmates who graduated went on to work for so-called “black companies,” workplaces that violate labor laws through chronic overtime and exploit young workers who are desperate to gain work experience in a

competitive job market (Furuichi 2014). Not inclined to work for such black companies, he looked for opportunities such as internships in rural areas to make connections and learn from those striving to live a self-sufficient life. For him, the economic logic of rural life was an attractive option, “I’d rather earn 100,000 yen in the countryside and pay zero rent in a renovated *akiya* than earn 200,000 yen in the city and spend half on rent.” City life, he concluded, demanded more labor simply to maintain basic living expenses.

Apart from dissatisfaction with work, some in-migrants revealed that the move to rural areas was a means for them to gain some time to figure out what to do next. While the backgrounds of my interlocutors are diverse, many were highly educated, with degrees from elite universities such as the University of Tokyo and Keio University. Several had also lived overseas as high school students or through working holiday visas in places such as Canada, Australia, and New Zealand, or had experience working in large cities like Tokyo before deciding to quit their jobs to move to the islands. With such cosmopolitan experiences, the choice to move to the Japanese countryside may appear counterintuitive, but the following narratives illustrate how the rural can serve as a temporary refuge.

4.2.1 Highly educated but unsure of the future

Not all in-migrants resembled Mai, whose move was driven by clear values regarding food, sustainability, and alternative lifestyles. In contrast, others moved with less clarity or intent, seeing the countryside more as a temporary escape rather than an end destination. Yuri, for example, a young woman in her early 20s, moved to Yuge island in early 2021 as a newly appointed COKT member. Like Mai before her, she applied for the job without knowing much about the island itself. This was a pattern I observed frequently among COKT participants, many of whom viewed the program as an opportunity to leave the city with the safety net of a stable salary. They did not always have a clear idea of where they may go or what they may end up doing except with the promise of a monthly salary and the chance to live a new life in the countryside.

Originally from Yokohama, a large city south of Tokyo, Yuri was not only new to rural life but had never lived alone before arriving on the island. We became friends as we were around the same age, and she often visited the guesthouse I was staying at for dinners and social events. Yuri had studied diligently in high school, entered a top private university in Tokyo, and followed her father’s advice to major in law, despite having little interest in the

subject. She told me she regretted not following her own choice, but the degree helped her secure a respectable job in the education sector after graduation. Yuri worked hard at the job for five years, often staying late and working overtime as she was not confident in her abilities and felt she had to work extra hard to keep her job. Working overtime was so normalized at her company that she described it simply as *shōganai* (it cannot be helped). One of the main reasons she had applied for the COKT program was that she felt she needed some time to reassess her career and think about what she wanted to do with her life. She also wished to move out of home to gain some independence. Yuri says:

I didn't really think about what I wanted to study in university, I followed my father's wishes and entered a top university studying what he advised. I then followed the expected path of finding a job and started working in a large company. It was a lot of work—my hours are usually 9am–10pm. I wanted to have my own time, to take it easy (yukkuri shitai) and think about the kind of life I could live and not only what career I could have. I did not have time to think about what I wanted to do because I was always so busy working.

Yuri lived in a block of concrete apartments owned by the local municipality in Kamijima town, which are offered at a discount rate according to one's income. The interior is no different to a typical apartment one might find in the city. Though she enjoys the island's natural environment, she has no desire to pursue real rural living, such as renting a more traditional wooden house or trying her hand at farming. She prefers the convenience of apartment living and shopping at the supermarket, like what she is used to in Tokyo. She also often uses online services like Amazon to purchase things she cannot buy on the island, such as some kinds of alcohol and other goods.

Jun, another young COKT participant in his early twenties, had a similar experience. A recent graduate from the University of Tokyo, he had moved to Yuge island directly after university without a clear plan. Graduating during the pandemic left him feeling uncertain and unmotivated:

I spent one year after graduation just sitting at home and watching dramas. I didn't know what I wanted to do, but I did know that I didn't want to be a salaryman [salaried office worker]. Though I knew I could earn good money working in Tokyo,

money is not the most important factor for me. However, I probably would not have moved here if there was no internet to access YouTube and Amazon.

Jun is also not interested in experiencing rural life and sees his move to the islands as a temporary way out of the city. He was after a change of scenery, as he was feeling lost after graduation. The COKT program offered him a relatively stress-free job and a stable income of around 150,000 yen a month. Jun tells me he does not go out much and is content in living a quiet life as he adjusts to island life. He does not see himself staying in the long term but hopes to use the time to think about what is next. By my follow-up fieldwork, both Yuri and Jun had left the islands after completing their three-year contracts, and Yuri had returned to a corporate job in Tokyo.

4.2.2 Fresh start after dropping out of urban life

For others like Ryusei, rural Japan was an unexpected place where one could start afresh. Unlike Yuri and Jun, who had graduated from top universities but felt lost, Ryusei had enrolled in university but dropped out soon after. He struggled with academic pressure and the expectations imposed by his family and society, which framed higher education as the only path toward a respectable job. During university, Ryusei worked part-time in restaurants to support himself to cover the high cost of city living. As he explained:

I struggled to complete university and faced judgment from those close to me, including my family. I was working part-time jobs in restaurants to make ends meet back in my home city, which had become very expensive. I came to [name of island] to visit a friend and ended up staying. The community is very supportive here and I can live comfortably, unlike in the city, where your success depends on your education.

For Ryusei and his partner, the islands offered a clean slate free from the pressures and expectations of city life. They both started working part-time to support themselves, which was enough to live on given the low cost of living and rent. Ryusei started to pick up multiple jobs around the island. These included working at the local restaurant and guiding tours for visitors, which recalls the *hyakushō* lifestyle that historically drew on having 100 jobs. In Ryusei's case, the initial choice of jobs was largely dependent on what was available rather than searching for a dream occupation. Now after a few years, Ryusei is cutting down his hours at his part-time jobs to focus on running his own tourism company after receiving some funding from the town to start a bicycle rental business. He had become an

entrepreneur, something he did not think was possible when he was living paycheck to paycheck back in the city.

The affordability of *akiya* and the generous subsidies from the local municipality for renovation costs (up to 50% of the total costs) enabled young in-migrants like Ryusei and his partner to purchase a home that would otherwise be too expensive in a city like Tokyo. After initially renting a subsidized municipal apartment like Yuri, they rented a detached house found on the *akiya* bank. After a few years of looking on the *akiya* bank, Ryusei and his partner purchased a two-story property with a sea view for just over 200,000 yen and began renovating it themselves. Although Ryusei and his partner speak openly about possibly living overseas again in the future, for now they feel settled on the islands, relieved to have escaped the financial pressures and social judgments of urban life.

4.2.3 Life as a NEET on a remote island

The low cost of living on the island has also made it possible for some in-migrants to pursue lifestyles that do not rely on stable employment. One such case is Aiko. When I first met her, she introduced herself as a NEET (not in education, employment, or training). She was not ashamed of the term and told me she had intentionally chosen to be a “professional NEET” and lived without a stable job for nearly 10 years. At the time we met, she was living in the “0-Yen House,” an experimental shared-house project on the island of Ikuchijima led by a local artist seeking to repurpose vacant houses for young people to live free of charge (see Chapter 6).

After we talked a bit more, Aiko said that while she has no fixed employment, she occasionally took on odd jobs to cover minimal living expenses when local businesses need extra hands, such as helping pick citrus for a local farmer. She is satisfied with her life, yet acknowledged the social judgment she faced by those who do not understand her chosen lifestyle:

I did not like living in Tokyo; it was a bit lonely. I received money from my partner and family, so I did not need to work and became a NEET, but I wanted to become more independent so I moved out. Now I spend my time reading or fishing and work a little to cover my living costs. I am mostly satisfied but one downside is that people judge you for not doing anything.

While the low cost of living allows Aiko to work infrequently, it also limited her mobility and lead to isolation. Transportation by car is expensive due to bridge tolls, and public transport was infrequent, meaning Aiko rarely left the island. While she does feel isolated at times, Aiko plans to stay for the time being. She expressed gratitude for the friendships she found through the shared house and wider in-migrant community. After six months, she posted a reflective message on Facebook:

I have been on the island for six months and for the first time in decades, my life is truly fulfilled. I'm glad I came to this island! But if I had been on my own, I would have been isolated, so I'm so grateful for the other in-migrants, and I feel like all the pain I've been through is now paying off. Good times and bad times don't last forever, that's life, isn't it? It's impermanent. There will come a time when even my current sense of fulfilment will come to an end, but I will live life to the fullest, crying and laughing. At this rate, I'll keep going forward at my own pace.

Aiko's experience reveals the tensions between individual autonomy and community expectations. While she is satisfied with her current minimalist lifestyle, where she does not have to worry about paying rent and only works when she needs to cover food and transportation costs, a downside is that she finds it hard to relate to her neighbors and locals on the island and she feels judged by them. Locals struggled to accept her limited participation in community labor and expect her to work harder as a young person, whereas she intentionally tries to work less and spend her days as freely as possible.

NEETs, together with “freeters” (*furītā*), a term referring to nonregular workers who are not employed as full-time tenured employees, have often been framed as social problems in Japan, diverging from the normative school-to-work transition (Genda 2007). They are viewed as those who have fallen through the cracks of society. Media narratives tend to portray NEETS as lacking willpower or rejecting work, often citing the changing attitudes among young people toward work as the main cause (Inui 2005), rather than a consequence of increased employment precarity since the economic slowdown from the 1990s (M. Wong 2016). My conversations with Aiko and other young in-migrants who described themselves as NEETs show that they did not view the term negatively and openly used it to identify themselves. Though they call themselves NEETS, they take up paid work from time to time by helping local businesses with odd jobs such as fruit-picking or part-time local shops and restaurants. The islands were attractive to them because they were able to secure housing

without paying rent, work when they needed to through jobs offered to them by word of mouth and generally live a flexible low-pressure lifestyle.

4.2.4 Taking refuge in the countryside

These narratives demonstrate another strand of rural migration: those who move to the countryside as a temporary refuge from the city rather than as a pursuit of the “good life.” In-migrants like Yuri and Jun see their time on the islands as transitional phase while they rethink their lives and plan for their future. They could not live up to their family’s and society’s expectations of finding a job and staying happily employed in Tokyo. Although the COKT program aims to encourage long-term settlement and community revitalization by mobilizing urbanites, their cases illustrate that the program is also adopted as a way out of the city for young people navigating uncertainty. In this respect, Mai, can be regarded as a “success case” as she went on to start her own farm and café after completing the program (though she also eventually moved out by the end of my fieldwork), Yuri and Jun did not follow her path to stay. Their reason for leaving was not because rural living did not live up to their expectations or because they felt isolated (Halfacree and Rivera 2012); rather, it was simply a case of the broader flexibility afforded by contemporary mobilities and lifestyles.

These cases highlight a generational shift in rural migration. Unlike traditional lifestyle migrants in postindustrial countries who after often middle-aged, affluent and seeking a slower pace of life associated with the rural idyll (Benson and O’Reilly 2009; Costello 2007; Fountain and Hall 2002), many of the in-migrants I met were in their early 20s and have little savings. In contrast, most of the “stressed professionals” seeking out the countryside were documented to be those in their 40s or 50s with grown-up children, such as the case of lifestyle migrants in New Zealand (Fountain and Hall 2002) or the affluent middle-class families from China, who opt out of city living to pursue spiritual satisfaction and alternative education for their children (Friedman 2023). Klien (2020) describes these young urban-rural migrants in Japan as engaging in “moratorium migration” (Klien 2020, 124), a liminal period in which they pause, reassess, and grapple with their ambiguous identity owing to a lack of appealing options on how to spend their lives. Such cases are reflective of the postgrowth nature of contemporary Japan, characterized by employment and social precarity (Allison 2012; Osawa et al. 2013).

The contrasting cases of Ryusei and Aiko further illustrate the diverse motivations and lived experiences of young in-migrants. For Ryusei and his partner, the islands offered an opportunity to rebuild their lives after failing to “make it” in the city. In this sense, they are also different from lifestyle-style migrants who “opt into” rural living (Friedman 2023; Hoey 2014) as opposed to “dropping out” of urban life. Despite not finishing university and therefore unable to find a desirable job in the city, the islands have allowed Ryusei to obtain a high quality of life and even home ownership. Ryusei has integrated well into the community after taking up part-time work, which allowed him to expand his social networks and display a willingness to work hard and contribute to community life. In contrast, Aiko, who had hoped to live on her own terms as a NEET, experienced judgement from the community when those around her struggled to understand her lifestyle choice. Aiko’s frugal way of life, including not owning a car, and working as little as possible, made it difficult for her to earn the trust and respect of the community. Although both may be described as “taking refuge” in the countryside, their experiences underscore the varied ways young people navigate rural living and the complex social dynamics they encounter.

4.3 Young return migrants

Compared to I-turners, young return migrants, known as U-turners, described different motivations for returning to their hometowns. U-turners were born and raised in the rural community to which they returned after time away. Many U-turners told me they had returned because they were motivated to contribute to the vitality of their hometown, alongside personal considerations such as personal ties or lifestyle preferences. They also noted the recent rise in I-turners as a positive influence that had increased the number of new shops and activities in the area, making their hometowns more attractive and appealing to return to: an emerging café, tourism, and creative scene brought a sense of momentum that some had not felt during their childhood.

Research on return migration in Europe similarly identifies returnees as important “change agents” who bring new ideas, skills, and outlooks gained elsewhere (Nadler et al. 2016). This was confirmed during my fieldwork, where the rise in tourism in the Shimanami area has enabled many young U-turners to expand their work and business outside traditional industries, often combining part-time employment with side businesses in hospitality, guiding, farming, or creative work.

Having experienced study and work in urban areas, many U-turners gain a renewed appreciation for their hometown including its slower pace of life and environmental qualities. It was common to hear stories describing how they could not wait to leave the islands when they were in their teens but then had had a change of heart after they traveled outside the islands, which made them realize the positive aspects of their hometown. One young woman recalled how she “hated the countryside (*inaka daikirai*)” while growing up and that there “there was nothing (on her home island), I definitely wanted to leave” (*nanimo nai kara, zettai detai*). She longed for the excitement of big cities she saw on television as a child where there were Starbucks and convenience stores, making her feel she was missing out. A high-school exchange trip to a small town in Australia shifted her perspective. There she met young Australian classmates who were proud to be from their small hometown and wanted to return when they were adults. Simple pleasures of campfires, stargazing, outdoor play all felt familiar to her own childhood, making her realize what she had overlooked.

Rather than focusing on what was missing, she began to appreciate what her home island had to offer. After graduating from university, she decided to return and now works part-time while developing a tour-guiding and food business. She dreams of renovating an *akiya* into a place to hold cooking workshops in the future, though financial independence remains a challenge. Her part-time job on the island earns her around 800 yen an hour and she still lives with her parents due to limited savings.

For some U-turners, their identity can be both an asset and source of constraint. Positives included being already well connected to the people and place, which can come in handy when accessing resources. For example, one U-turner explained he was only able to negotiate renting a vacant shophouse to run his guesthouse because the owners trusted him as a local with family roots in the town. However, in other cases, familial and community expectations can also hinder entrepreneurial pursuits. Another U-turner working at the town hall faced strong family opposition when he wished to open a bookstore. Another was a kindergarten teacher who was discouraged from quitting her job to start a café. Both faced opposition from their families who were worried that their businesses would not succeed. Despite such challenges, the attitude toward U-turners who are making the move while they are still in their 20s to 30s has been viewed more positively by the wider community, as many older residents support the idea of them returning amid the deepening sense of crisis due to depopulation.

4.3.1 The mission to revitalize one's hometown

One U-turner in her early 30s, Sayuri, reached out to me soon after I arrived on the islands after hearing I came from Australia, the country where she had spent a year on a working holiday. Born and raised on one of the islands, Sayuri left for university in a nearby city and worked for a few years in an office job before deciding to travel abroad. Her time overseas was transformative: it reshaped her views of her hometown and ultimately prompted her decision to make a U-turn with a clear intention of contributing to the growing tourism industry in the region. As she explained:

I decided to leave the island when I reached high school as I grew tired of the small community here and wanted to interact with new people. After university, I spent some time in Australia on a working holiday and learned English. I returned because my experiences away from home made me realize how comfortable life is here. Also, I wanted to contribute to the growing tourism industry in the Shimanami Kaidō area, where there is an increasing number of foreign tourists, though I think I am still in the minority, as only 10 out of 42 classmates from my elementary and junior high school still live here.

Sayuri shifting attitude reflects a broader pattern among U-turners: the very qualities that once motivated their departure (smallness, familiarity, limited opportunities) often become the features they value upon return. As a child, she had initially wanted to leave the island as soon as she could. She had chosen to commute to high school in Onomichi rather than attend the local high school on the island as she wanted to meet new people. After experiencing life outside the islands, however, she realized the attractive aspects of her hometown: proximity to family, an intimate community, a slower pace of life, and a landscape she realized she had taken for granted.

Sayuri now actively participates in the tourism sector that has grown alongside the rise of I-turn migration. She enjoys interacting with the rising number of tourists and I-turners, many of whom are close to her age. In her spare time, she runs bicycle tours, including guiding foreign tourists thanks to her English-language skills. Looking to the future, she aspires to become an English teacher and is studying for a teaching certificate to secure a stable job alongside her guiding and farming activities.

During our time together, Sayuri often took me cycling to her favorite cafés, scenic spots, and places she visited as a child. Some of these places, such as a local park where she often went for picnics, were now abandoned and overgrown. These physical signs of demographic decline have become powerful motivators for her desire to stay long term:

I plan to stay on [name of island] for the long term because I want to contribute to tourism and help manage my grandfather's farmland. I think I also need to take care of my parents in the future. In addition, I prefer the countryside to cities. I noticed this point after I spent time in many other places.

Sayuri helps maintain her grandfather's large *hatake*, growing citrus and figs which she markets to local cafés and sells directly to customers through Instagram. Like many older farmers, her grandfather struggles to manage the land, and Sayuri feels a responsibility to keep it productive while pursuing other ventures. She explains:

My plan is to work as an English teacher, which will be my main job to earn a stable income. I will also continue to be a cycling guide and farmer at my grandfather's farmland. I'm interested in farming and helping my grandfather with farming. My grandfather is already 84 years old, and my cousins and want to keep his farmland, so I visit his farm 3 days a week.

At the same time, Sayuri acknowledges the challenges of island life, which include: limited public facilities and infrastructure; the absence of supermarkets in some areas, which means residents who cannot drive must wait for the mobile supermarket van to visit; infrequent public transport; high toll fees for crossing bridges to leave the island; and limited medical services at island hospitals, which can only perform simple treatments. Nevertheless, she is determined to continue building a livelihood that blends tourism, teaching, and farming with an underlying desire to revitalize her hometown through these activities.

4.3.2 Sense of crisis as a motivation to return

Other U-turners also reiterate the importance of their time away from their hometown as crucial in allowing them to recognize how good life was back home. Another group cited family-related motivations, particularly the desire to raise children in an environment with abundant nature. Unlike many I-turners, they were not attempting to escape city life but were

instead motivated by a combination of personal circumstances and a growing sense of responsibility toward their hometowns.

A U-turner in his early 30s, Jiro, had spent most of his 20s in Tokyo studying and working in the healthcare industry. After gaining work experience and getting married, he decided to return to his home island of Yuge with his wife. Jiro now works as a physiotherapist and is raising two young children. He noted that his motivation to return was not only to offer a better environment for his children but also out of a growing sense of responsibility to contribute to his hometown:

I loved the city life but thought it was hard and expensive to raise children there. I wanted to raise them in a place with plenty of nature like what I experienced in my childhood. It also made me appreciate how easy it is to live here [sumiyasui]. I also have a sense of crisis since the population is continuing to decline.

Jiro's parents supported his decision to return, and many other residents also expressed relief and gratitude toward young people who choose to stay or return rather than leaving for bigger cities. This marks a notable shift from earlier decades, when returning early was stigmatized as a sign of failure as rural areas were once seen as a "stagnant backwater that serves as the last resort for individuals who have not managed to make it in Tokyo" (Klien 2020, 9). Unlike many I-turners, self-actualization and lifestyle reasons are secondary to the sense of crisis from depopulation. Jiro said:

I think there is a change in mentality for us U-turners, as it was seen as a failure if you returned so early, but now people realize the seriousness [of depopulation] and are happy if you come back.

Jiro and a small group of childhood friends are committed to making the island more attractive to both visitors and in-migrants. Out of the 38 students in his year level, roughly 10 have remained behind or have returned after time away. Jiro believes that those who remained lack the knowledge or new ideas that are much needed to revitalize the islands. They tended to work in stable local jobs such as the town hall or shipbuilding, whereas U-turners who returned are more likely to experiment with new initiatives. His own time away had gained him confidence to open his own clinic.

In his spare time, Jiro and his friends create content for a popular Instagram account with close to 10,000 followers. The account aims to “spread the charm” (*miriyoku*) of the remote islands they live on and features local festivals, scenery, foods, and industries. As a keen photographer, Jiro shoots most of the photos himself and has invested in learning how to use drones. He is now setting up a side business teaching drone photography and running a small tourism venture offering rental scooters and SUP (stand-up paddle board) experiences. Jiro says he is motivated to do various things that collaborate with the community rather than just opening a shop to make a profit.

Other U-turners have also embraced revitalization through entrepreneurship. One U-turner from Innoshima in his late twenties described it as his mission to return home and breathe new life into the island’s shuttered shops in order to attract visitors. After working at a hotel in a nearby city to gain experience, he moved back and opened a boutique hotel in a renovated vacant shophouse. He says:

I was working in the city in my 20s, but every time I returned to visit family on the islands, I noticed the warmth of the elders who are proud of our hometown. I also noticed the increase in vacant shops as aging businesses closed one by one. I decided I wanted to do something about it and was offered a vacant property. I had limited funds and gathered money through crowdfunding, something that I am grateful for, but which also put a lot of pressure on me to succeed, leading to many sleepless nights.

His comments highlight the unique challenges faced by U-turners. They often have strong motivations grounded in obligation, identity, and community ties, and must confront the expectations of family and neighbors, and the emotional burden and pressures of trying to reverse long-term decline. In this respect, U-turners form a distinct category within the broader landscape of rural in-migration, as their motivations differ from those of I-turners, who often seek self-actualization or temporary refuge from urban pressures. U-turners have enduring ties to place, frequently return in their 20s–40s while starting families, and are more likely to be invested in the long-term future of their hometowns. Yet these same ties can also constrain their freedom compared to I-turners, who arrive without prior connections or expected to conform to certain roles.

4.4 The relationship population

Alongside I-turners and U-turners, a third group emerged during my fieldwork: people who were not permanent residents but maintained regular, ongoing relationships with the islands. They included remote workers, long-stay visitors, seasonal “helpers,” people who maintained dual-residences, and others part of revitalization projects who did not fit neatly into existing migration categories. Their presence shows a growing interest in part-time rural living, enhanced by digital connectivity and increased mobility since COVID-19.

This group are examples of Japan’s *kankei jinkō* (relationship population). Unlike conventional in-migrants, members of the *kankei jinkō* live primarily elsewhere but engage repeatedly and meaningfully with a rural place. Their patterns of involvement blur the boundaries between tourism, lifestyle experimentation, and long-term community engagement.

4.4.1 Repeat visitors through a local guesthouse

While staying at S Guesthouse, I met several remote workers who exemplified this fluid mode of rural engagement. Increased mobilities from the COVID-19 pandemic popularized concepts such as “workcation” (work and vacation) or “bleisure” (business and leisure), giving people a chance to try out rural living while still working their usual job (Matsushita 2023). One woman in her 30s from Tokyo regularly visited the island for two weeks while working remotely. I learned that she had first visited as a tourist before the pandemic and now returned annually, sometimes two to three times a year, describing S Guesthouse as her second home. In Tokyo she would usually be so busy with work (she worked from home) that she rarely left the house, but she enjoys spending time at S Guesthouse, where she had made friends with local residents and other in-migrants on the island, including the guesthouse managers. During each stay, she would eat out at the various local cafes and eateries, purchase local products, join community activities such as making miso or picking fruit, and visit friends she had made on earlier trips:

I first discovered this guesthouse while visiting as a tourist a few years ago. The people were very warm here and I met some local people who invited me to experience fruit-picking and other activities. It felt like a relative’s home, and I am

returning now to visit the guesthouse staff and other locals who have become friends. It is a way for me to rejuvenate between periods of intense work in Tokyo.

The guesthouse staff described such repeat guests as “repeaters” (*ripītā san*), welcoming them with a warm “welcome home!” (*okaeri*), a greeting typically reserved for family members returning home. Some repeaters often returned to help with annual traditions and customs, such as the autumn festival (*aki matsuri*), or to support the businesses of friends they had made during previous stays.

The guesthouse’s helper system, where individuals apply and stay for a few weeks helping the staff manage the guesthouse in exchange for food and board, was another example of sustained relationships with rural areas. Some helpers would return regularly after making connections with local people, and a few of them have eventually relocated to the island as I-turners. Guesthouses across Japan also advertise such positions, often through social media, as an opportunity for those interested in experiencing rural life without having to worry about finding a place to live or living costs. One helper in her mid-20s described how her curiosity about island life eventually developed into a long-term relationship:

I visited initially as a tourist and found out about the helper system. I was interested in living on an island as I am originally from a place surrounded by mountains, so it was an exciting change of scenery for me. Eventually, I started making friends here and now visit when I can several times a year. Every time I come back, I visit my friends who are running caf  s or help another friend at his farm. I bring local produce from the islands to sell at the caf   where I work in my hometown.

These cases demonstrate how informal hospitality platforms such as guesthouses act as community hubs where visitors can experience deeper forms of engagement through shared meals and community activities that make them wish to return. They resonate with Tahara’s (2023) notion of a new type of tourist, which he calls “Tourist 2.0,” who are different to conventional tourists because they often stay longer and intend to revisit. Tourists 2.0 do not only consume leisure but also seek out higher local engagement to contribute to the community in some way by creating value for the region (Tahara 2023). Such tourists occupy a position between the *k  ry   jink  * (visitors who are part of the exchange population) and the *kankei jink  *, with the potential to transition to in-migrants if meaningful connections take root for them to consider their role and identity in the community.

4.4.2 Dual residences and start-ups in the countryside

Other examples of the *kankei jinkō* include those who maintain dual residences. I often encountered university students, recent graduates and young professionals primarily based in cities like Hiroshima or Tokyo but who spent much of their time on the islands. Several worked for a local start-up on the island of Ōsakishimajima aimed at rural revitalization using crowdfunding to renovate *akiya* into offices, community spaces, a restaurant, and accommodations for visitors. One of them takes a four-hour-long bullet train trip once a month to his family's home in Tokyo and deals with any administration there because he has not registered his change of address at the local ward office in Tokyo. It was not uncommon for some young people to spend most of their time in rural areas but not formally register a change in residence. When I asked him why, he said that he did not mind commuting and benefited from getting what he needed in Tokyo such as medical check-ups. His motivation for moving to the islands stemmed from his inability to find fulfilment in his previous job in Tokyo and his desire to “be free” (*kaihō saretakatta*) to explore his passions. When he felt helpless and wished to quit his job at his previous advertising company, he met the start-up founder at a talk event and decided to join him. He says:

Working for this start-up that aims to revitalize this declining island feels more fulfilling than my old job in Tokyo. I get paid less at this job, but I have a lot more freedom and time. I oversee my own projects and can have the autonomy to develop them.

His activities included running an education hub out of a renovated old building offering DIY workshops (one was making furniture from waste material), hosting an event to make *mochi* (rice cakes) with villagers, and other art-based programs for children. Other members of the start-up are currently renovating additional vacant houses and running cafés, bars, and other small businesses. The start-up owns several facilities in the village and encourages young people to take responsibility and use them the way they wish, thereby enabling them to pursue self-actualization to some extent. As staff members, they receive a wage to cover living costs and are provided with a vacant house to live in for free (often requiring them to self-renovate). While the staff are encouraged to direct their activities, which includes thinking about how to sustain such activities financially, one of the members told me how difficult it was to achieve consistent sales to ensure financial stability. At the time of my visit, the members were planning multi-day workshops for children and teenagers

outside the island who would pay to join the program, similar to the format of a summer camp.

Another student involved in the start-up explained their dual-residence lifestyle:

I still rent a small apartment in the city while I complete my studies, but most of the time I am here on the island. I am currently renovating a small vacant house I was given as my own residence. When I am not renovating, I run a small bar when there are customers while also helping at a restaurant the start-up is operating. The bar is only open when there are visitors, and it is a pay-as-you-like system. I use the money to buy new stock and have not really thought about how sustainable it is—for now, it is just fun to try out new things and think about what I want to do when I graduate.

The above cases show how rural spaces enable experimentation, learning, and self-discovery, especially when supported by community resources. Their semi-resident status allows them to straddle between urban and rural contexts, maintaining access to benefits from the city (healthcare, family, convenience) while enjoying rural freedoms to pursue self-actualization.

4.4.3 Rethinking mobilities through *kankei jinkō*

The experiences above highlight a crucial point: not all forms of engagement with the rural require permanent relocation. For those who are part of the *kankei jinkō*, rural living becomes an additional mode of life rather than a choice between city or countryside. Their mobility, both physical and social, reinforces linkages between rural and urban areas, circulating ideas, people, and skills across these spaces.

The concept of *kankei jinkō* has gained momentum as policymakers and scholars seek new models of urban-rural exchange that do not focus on migration as the main goal (Andō et al. 2022; Horiuchi and Morishige 2024; Sakuno 2019). Introduced in 2016, the term remains broad and is yet to be clearly defined. It encompasses people who regularly visit rural areas, those who support them through consumption or tax donations, and others who maintain dual residences (Sakuno 2019; Tanaka 2017). While there is a common expectation for *kankei jinkō* to contribute to revitalization in some way (Andō et al. 2022; Sakuno 2019), this is not always the case. As Sato's (2022) study of people who maintain dual residences shows, some are driven by individual motives such as quality of life rather than a desire to support local

development or revitalization, with some critics arguing that dual-residence individuals can function as “freeloaders,” as they use local services without paying taxes (Namba 2018). Amid these debates, the scholarship on *kankei jinkō* broadens the analytical lens beyond migration alone, capturing emerging and fluid forms of rural involvement that reflect the realities of postgrowth Japan. More long-term empirical studies are needed to understand how this group can positively contribute to rural revitalization.

4.5 Chapter Summary

This chapter has examined the diverse forms of rural mobilities of young people in their 20s to 40s who have diverse backgrounds, livelihoods and engage with the islands in different ways. Their experiences challenge established categories such as counterurbanization and lifestyle migrants (Benson and O’Reilly 2009; Friedman 2023; Torkington 2010), which typically describe a privileged mode of mobility that is “voluntary, driven by consumption, and shaped by cultural imaginaries” (Olsson and O’Reilly 2017, 133). Instead, the cases presented reveal multiple pathways, each shaped by changing socio-economic conditions, generational shifts, and personal life trajectories.

To help visualize the diversity across the 62 interviewees, four charts were created to map out emerging tendencies relating migration type (U/I/J turn or relationship population) with livelihood, motivations, and *akiya* use. The first chart (Figure 4.3) maps out livelihoods by assigning each interviewee a number (the same number they appear in the Appendix A: Interview table). This format has been adopted in the subsequent charts showing motivations (chapter 5) and *akiya* use (chapter 6). Many interviewees reported multiple jobs and thus appear in multiple livelihood categories as represented by multiple dots connected by lines. The colored shapes start to group the dots/interviewees together based on their livelihood and lifestyle choice: 35 entrepreneurs (own business), 14 salaried workers/regular employees (regular job), 10 contemporary *hyakushō*, 9 half-farmer, half-X, and 3 NEETs (no regular job). Out of the 14 that have a stable salaried job, five are COKT workers employed by the local municipality on fixed term 3-year contracts and the rest either work as town hall staff, for local industries (such as fishing, charcoal making, winery) or for their family business. I have included the four interviewees who are part of the relationship population as well as myself into the charts as well to show my position during fieldwork in relation to the interviewees.

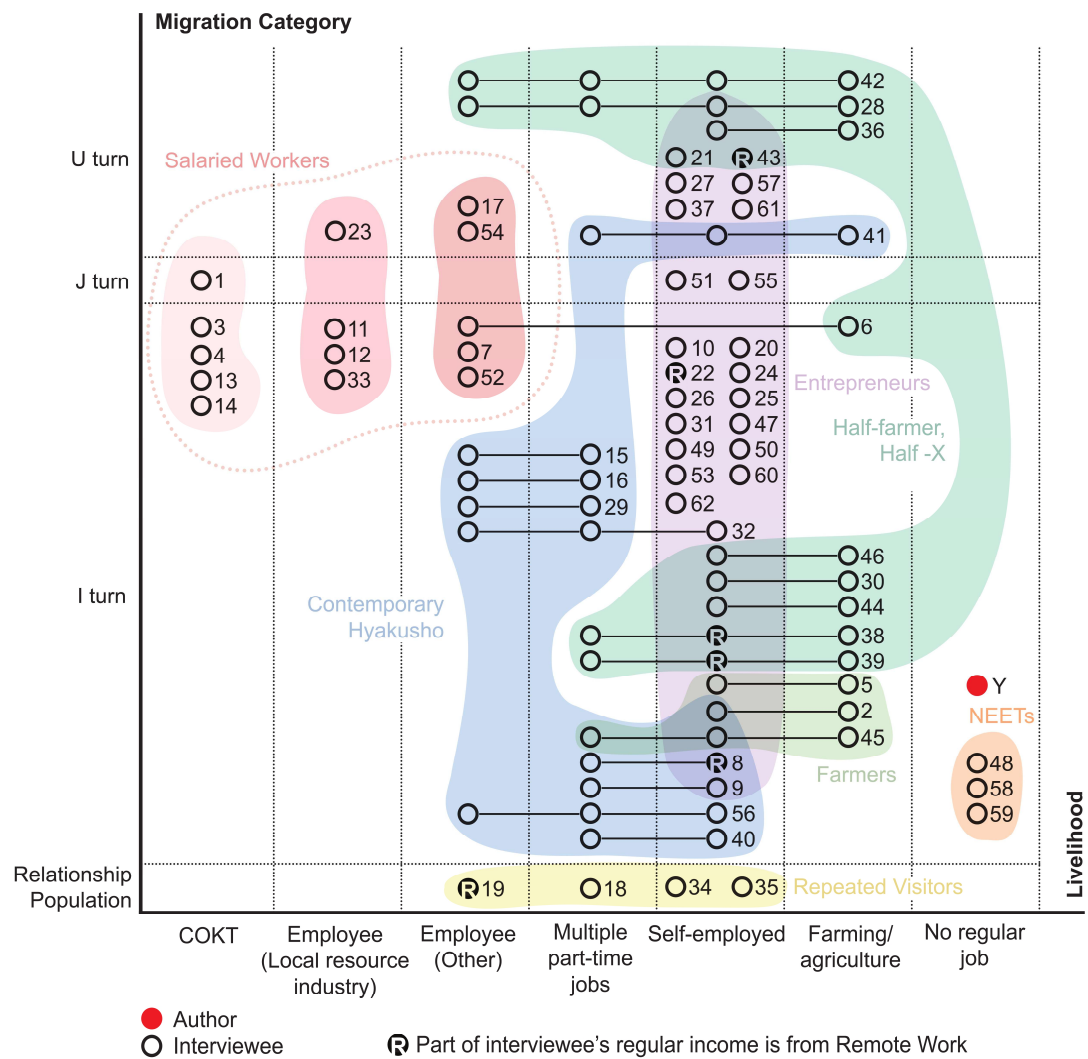


Figure 4.3. Livelihood of interviewees.

Notably, not all fit neatly into one category as shown in the overlapping shapes: these include Mai (Interviewee no. 2) who fit into three categories as she is an entrepreneur, farmer, and contemporary *hyakushō* all at the same time. Intentional seeking self-sufficiency, Mai consciously consumes as little as possible after experiencing the 2011 Great East Japan Earthquake. Others, like Aiko (Interviewee no. 48), intentionally pursue non-work-centered lifestyles made possible by low rural living costs. In the case of younger in-migrants such as Yuri (Interviewee no. 4) and Jun (Interviewee no. 13), rural areas are taken up as a temporary refuge—a welcome escape from early-career precarity and society’s expectations of them. Still others, like Ryusei (Interviewee no.8), view rural Japan as a chance to reset after struggling to “make it” in the cities. U-turners, on the other hand, displayed higher levels of commitment and expressed a desire to stay long-term after returning. Having gained experiences outside their hometowns, they often rediscover the value of these places and feel

a heightened sense of responsibility amid demographic decline. Their engagement frequently takes the form of entrepreneurship, tourism promotion, or community revitalization projects.

These motivations resonate with broader generational experiences in post-bubble Japan. Since the prolonged economic stagnation known as the “Lost Decade” (*ushinawareta jūnen*) (Funabashi and Kushner 2015), the rise of non-regular employment has redefined youth trajectories (Furlong 2015). Dissatisfaction with urban labor markets has long driven young Japanese to seek alternative life courses whether through Working Holidays abroad (Kawashima 2010) or, increasingly, through moving to rural areas. Such struggles and lack of satisfaction are known to be common among the “Lost Generation” (*ushinawareta sedai*), who entered the job market in the recession following the collapse of the economic bubble in the early 1990s. Migration, both domestic and international, thus becomes a strategy to reimagine the future in the face of systemic constraint.

At the same time, the chapter has shown that rural mobilities are not limited to residents. The rise of the *kankei jinkō*, who include remote workers, repeat visitors, and those with dual residences, demonstrates how rural areas can serve as sites for experimentation, well-being, and social connection without requiring permanent relocation. These individuals maintain urban ties while fostering meaningful relationships with rural communities, challenging binary understandings of “migration” versus “tourism.”

Taken together, these cases illustrate the complexity and fluidity of contemporary rural mobilities in Japan. Rather than a simple “return to the countryside,” these movements unfold across varied durations, intensities, and motivations, confirming rural mobility as an ongoing and often nonlinear process. As such, they prompt a need to rethink and reexamine dominant paradigms in mobility studies. Established frameworks such as counterurbanization and lifestyle migration need to be expanded to capture the more fluid nature of contemporary mobilities and their different forms, duration, and directions as ongoing processes that are increasingly common among younger generations. Concepts emerging from Japan, notably the *kankei jinkō*, can provide a useful lens to broaden how we understand urban-rural linkages by emphasizing relationships and ongoing exchange over physical relocation. Ultimately, what matters is not only who moves, but how they connect, what kinds of relationships they develop, and whether these connections can be sustained and meaningful. It is these relational ties, rather than residential status alone, that hold the greatest potential to support the long-term revitalization of rural Japan.

The diversity of mobilities explored in this chapter shows that young people are not only moving to rural Japan but are engaging in various activities according to their motivation and interests. Whether as committed returnees, temporary escapees, or relationship-driven visitors, they are all creating an alternative way of life in their own terms. Yet among these varied trajectories, one group stands out for its particularly visible impact: those who choose to build livelihoods from the ground up. Many young in-migrants channel their search for autonomy, meaning, and community into entrepreneurial projects that reshape local economies and reconfigure rural spaces. The next chapter turns to this group of rural in-migrant entrepreneurs and examines how their aspirations, activities, and everyday practices are examples of the “signs of life” observed by Banana Yoshimoto.

Chapter 5: Entrepreneurs in the countryside

In this chapter, I continue to examine young in-migrants and their motivations, focusing specifically on those who have become entrepreneurs. Traditionally, rural enterprises in Japan were mainly passed down from generation to generation and rooted in accumulated local knowledge and reputation. On the islands, residents have long depended on primary industries such as fishing, seaweed cultivation, and agriculture, or on heavy industries like shipbuilding. The shift toward a postindustrial and postagricultural society has prompted the younger generation to look for alternative opportunities to make a living while pursuing their ideal lifestyle in the countryside. As Slee (2005) argues, rural areas are no longer driven by productive land use but by consumption-driven demands. Although agriculture is still important today, the profit from farming alone is often not enough to sustain rural communities economically (Haga 2018).

The terms “entrepreneur” and “entrepreneurship” have broad definitions in existing literature. Here, I adopt a functional view of entrepreneurship as the creative combination of resources to create new value (Korsgaard et al. 2015). Though rural entrepreneurship is diverse, it is place-specific and shaped by the particular spatial, social and environmental characteristics of the rural (Lang and Fink 2019). A rural entrepreneur can be defined as “an individual who uses the resources of the regional economy; geographical, physical, topographical, labor, and so on to gain competitive advantage by trading in goods or services which ultimately generate social or economic capital for the rural environment in which the entrepreneur is located” (McElwee and Atherton 2021, 568). The rise of young rural in-migrant entrepreneurs on a group of depopulating islands represents a promising shift contributing to more positive images of the countryside as a place of opportunity rather than decline.

Many young in-migrants I encountered have started small independent businesses such as cafés, bookstores, bakeries, homeware stores, and guesthouses. I was told that this wave of new enterprises was a recent phenomenon that began in the last decade or so, coinciding with the introduction of the government’s COKT program in 2009, which encouraged an entrepreneurial mindset as a means for revitalization (Haga 2018). In-migrant entrepreneurs bring know-how, skills, and expertise from urban areas (Keeble and Tyler 1995) which has led to the making of a kind of “cosmopolitan rurality” (Traphagan 2020).

Through the goods and services they offer to the aesthetic taste of interior spaces they design, rural entrepreneurs are remaking rural spaces in ways that are not only attractive places for visitors but also for themselves and other in-migrants.

This chapter begins by examining the mindset shift among the young in-migrants who now see the countryside as an advantageous location for realizing their entrepreneurial dream. It then discusses the ongoing challenges these entrepreneurs face, including achieving work-life balance and securing a stable income. The COVID-19 pandemic added another layer of challenges for entrepreneurs but also revealed high levels of resilience and embeddedness in the community. These developments point to new readings of the rural areas and suggest that they can no longer only be seen as backward and disadvantaged but as sites of experimentation, where members of the creative class can thrive (Bell and Jayne 2010). In this way, young in-migrant entrepreneurs play a pivotal role in remaking both the material and symbolic dimensions of rurality (Woods 2010).

5.1 A tale of two cafés

5.1.1 Creating a comfortable place for my hometown

A noticeable trend during my fieldwork was the number of small, stylish cafés that had begun to pop up across the islands. With the rise of tourism and a steady increase in young in-migrants, cafés emerged as accessible entry points into entrepreneurship as spaces that combined livelihood-making with the desire to cultivate community. A project I observed closely, from conception to construction and eventual opening, was a café initiated by a young U-turner in her 20s named Misa on the island of Innoshima. Over the course of my fieldwork, Misa became a close friend whom I often joined to discuss her aspirations and ideal way of life, assist with renovation work, and later help serve customers once the café opened. This small project evolved over the year from a dilapidated old shed into a cozy café that would exemplify Misa's goal of making her home island an attractive place where she, and others, could imagine long-term futures.

Like many other U-turners discussed in Chapter 4, Misa had felt limited by the small island community in her youth. Her home island of Innoshima is already the most populated in the Shimanami area with a population of over 20,000 before merging into Onomichi city in 2006. She told me when she was in junior high school, she had wanted to get out as soon as

possible. She left the island for high school in a nearby prefecture and lived in the dormitory, then moved again for university and subsequently to another city for her first job. After working for a few years and experiencing city life, she decided to move back to her hometown. She explains:

When I was living in [name of home island] before, I had a lot of fun as a child. But as I was approaching adulthood, I felt like I was living in a small world with few options. Now that I'm an adult, I've met a lot of different people and I've realized I can make my own choices, so I made the choice and came back home.

It was important for Misa to make her own choices and return to her hometown on her own terms, which made her feel empowered and more confident. For Misa, the decision to return centered on two questions: where to live (*sumu basho*) and how to live (*kurashi kata*). After considering her options after university, she realized she still liked her hometown the best. Returning to the house where she grew up and where her mother still lived, allowed her to reestablish a base. Misa then spent the next three years working at various jobs, including working part-time at a nearby guesthouse. She noted the jobs were not only a means to save up some money but more importantly, to make friends and rebuild social connections. The guesthouse hired many other young people and was a lively spot in the area. As most of her childhood friends had left the island, Misa found it hard to meet people as an adult but was able to befriend other young migrants at the guesthouse. Seeing them start small businesses inspired her to do the same. There was a small *akiya* next to her childhood home that had been vacant for many years. Misa decided to renovate it into something useful for the community and came up with the idea of a café.

Misa emphasized that her goal was not to become a café owner per se. Rather, she wanted to create a “comfortable place” (*igokochi ga ii basho*) for herself and the people she cared. The choice to open a café is simply a means to invite people to come, a low barrier of entry, where people from diverse backgrounds could feel welcome. Misa explains the inspiration behind the café:

I wanted to create a comfortable place for myself and the people I love: these include friends, family, local people, and even people I haven't met yet. The reason I incorporated the “café” element was to make a living. Running the place would allow me to earn the money I need to live. My goal is to do:

1. *Something I enjoy doing*
2. *Something that no one else has done yet (something that doesn't exist in my hometown)*
3. *Something where I can use my skills to the fullest*
4. *Something that many people are interested in*
5. *Something that will be useful to someone.*

When I first met Misa, she was still planning the concept and sketching out floor plans. Over the next few months, Misa coordinated local craftspeople to help repair the ceiling, replace the traditional tatami with a concrete floor, and connect services such as electricity and water. The remaining 50% of renovation work she would take on herself in a DIY manner with the help of friends and volunteers. Misa had befriended people at the guesthouse and volunteered at another friend's vacant house renovation project, where she learned basic skills such as woodworking and plastering. The friends she had made proved invaluable as they became a group of supportive members who would come to help her and give advice. As Misa is funding all the expenses herself, she is conscious of keeping costs low and makes use of her social networks to gather things she needs, such as crockery donated from another café nearby, secondhand furniture that people no longer need and other material and fittings. One day when out on a walk, she discovered a pile of terracotta planter pots on the roadside, she later repurposed these by hammering them down into small pieces and used them to create a path to the café.

From the outside, Misa's resourcefulness and use of her social networks to procure materials and labor made the project seem smooth and organic. When I asked Misa if she had encountered any challenges, she said that the choice to quit her job and start her own business was something her family had not been supportive of at first. As Misa had little experience in entrepreneurship, her mother thought she lacked the know-how and worried there would be financial issues. Misa felt anxious not only about the viability of the café but also about disappointing her family, especially as she depended on them for temporary living support. Pouring all her savings into the project made it stressful as she felt pressured to succeed. Added to this were the social pressures of a close-knit village where gossip spreads easily. Older neighbors asked, "Why aren't you married yet?" and "Aren't you lazy for not working full-time?" Misa hoped they would stop rejecting the values of her generation (*kachikan o hitei shinai*) and instead support them to live the life they wish.

Despite the challenges, Misa continued to work on the project and successfully opened her café after a few months. The café quickly became a lively space where friends and tourists gather to enjoy her homemade snacks and drinks. Misa now spends her days preparing drinks and baked goods for the café and organizing various events such as pop-up markets, often collaborating with other in-migrants in the area. She tries to enliven and support the community by selling local produce, offers her café as a venue for events, and hosts people by providing them with accommodation, including travelers. Misa is conscious of not only catering to visitors but also trying to welcome locals, especially older residents. She offers locals a discount for drinks and often chats with them when they visit. One of her motivations was precisely to fill a local gap: there had been no café in her neighborhood for people to gather.

Reflecting on her choice to become an entrepreneur, Misa believes that the freedom to control one's time is one of the biggest benefits. She believes that the ability to gain this freedom is also one of the biggest attractions of rural areas:

Here (on the island), you can decide almost entirely on your own how to spend your time. You can get cheap property [vacant houses] and land, and you can express yourself and live the life of your dreams.

This comment about being able to freely express oneself through one's life work was a recurring theme in my conversation with young migrants. Misa's café illustrates how entrepreneurial projects can enable self-expression, community-building, and new forms of rural belonging. The next case, however, reveals a very different model of rural entrepreneurship which is also driven by self-expression, but oriented toward exclusivity, curation, and privacy.

5.1.2 A hidden box for self-expression

Next to Innoshima, on the island of Mukaishima, a small wooden house sits on the top of a hill overlooking the sea. Visitors need to walk up a narrow path to reach this building which functions both as a residence and café. The café belongs to Sato and his partner, I-turners in their early 30s, who relocated to Mukaishima two years ago. There is no sign, and the café is not on Google Maps. Sato intentionally does not disclose the address. Customers must email to reserve a private time slot, only then will Sato send the location directly. Despite (or because of) this intentional obscurity, the café draws considerable attention despite its remote

location on a quiet part of the island. Reservation slots are announced on Instagram and often filled within minutes. Sato has a website but mainly uses Instagram to promote his business and communicate with over 20,000 followers.

After several failed attempts to secure a reservation myself, I was finally able to visit when a friend offered me their spot. A small group of us carpooled to get there, a request by Sato as there was limited parking nearby. Upon arrival, Sato and his partner greeted us and explained that we were the only group they would host that afternoon so we could sit wherever we liked. The open interior was bright and clean: existing wooden beams were restored, now complemented by new textured white plaster walls (Figure 5.1). The room was filled with a careful selection of vintage furniture and objects such as an old drawer, a handmade vase, and other art pieces. It was clear that every detail was carefully considered down to the tableware and cutlery. The set menu of seasonal sweets and coffee reinforced the sense of visiting a private home rather than a commercial café. Sato explained that he wished for customers to experience the café as if it were guests visiting a friend's home.



Figure 5.1. Interior of Sato's newly renovated café. Photo by author, February 5, 2022.

Unlike some other migrants who slowly progressed into entrepreneurship, Sato had a clear idea of what he wanted to do before moving to the islands. Sato was living in Tokyo before moving to the islands with his partner just before the pandemic. He had lived in Tokyo for more than a decade, working as a consultant and felt he had reached the end of a chapter after turning 30. Even though he valued aspects of his salaryman life, he never forgot his long-held dream: to open a space through which he could express himself. He described this space as a type of “box” where he “could show who he is” (*jibun ga hyōgen suru hako*). Sato explained that he tried to do this by creating a physical environment surrounded by things he liked and spending time with people he liked.

As to why he chose this hard-to-reach spot on the island, Sato says it was because he wanted to live in the area, which was a quiet residential neighborhood by the sea. Sato and his partner discovered the island on a holiday trip and was captivated by the natural scenery as well as the kindness of the locals he met. The mild climate was also a bonus. Rather than choosing somewhere closer to the center or near public transport, which may have helped increase customers, the remote location was more attractive from a living perspective. As a city dweller all his life, Sato felt he had “no hometown” (*furusato ga nai*). He felt this more after he started working at a company where his colleagues would return to their hometowns during holidays and reconnect with childhood friends. The island was the first place where he felt a desire to settle and hoped to make it his hometown:

The island is the first place I've ever felt like I wanted to live in. I hope to make it my hometown [furusato]. I think a hometown is not something that exists or something you seek but something you create for yourself.

Finding a suitable house took a year, a reminder that access to *akiya* remains challenging despite their abundance. Sato was patient and spent time inquiring in person asking key people in the area to obtain information and make introductions. Eventually, a former *akiya* became available after its previous in-migrant occupants moved out. Sato renovated the house with the help of local carpenters to ensure the old wooden structure was preserved. Although he has no formal design training, his aesthetic sensibilities, shaped by Pinterest references, produced a minimalist interior in contrast to Misa's more rustic DIY style. Both cafés exemplify the new aesthetics in-migrants bring to rural areas, contributing to what scholars describe as the “re-fashioning” or “re-dressing” of rural spaces (Ren 2023;

Yamagishi and Doering 2025). U-turners like Misa and I-turners like Sato bring with them their unique personalities and tastes, which materialize in the built form of their cafés.

A key difference between Sato's café and others is that it is also his home. For that reason, Sato hesitates to call it a café at all:

We moved here to not open a store or to operate a successful business, but because we wanted to live here. We only host one group at a time to ensure we can manage everything ourselves.

For Sato and his partner, the café is an extension of their lives. Hosting only one group at a time allows them to maintain high-quality service and a relaxed pace without the need to hire staff. It also reflects the lifestyle many in-migrants seek: slowness, intentionality, and boundaries between themselves and mass tourism. While the current booking system where customers email him to book can be time-consuming, Sato appreciates direct communication with his customers, whom he looks forward to meeting and getting to know as people. Before the set meal booking system, some customers would show up, order everything on the menu, spend most of their time taking photos, and leave soon after. The new system of serving a set menu to one group per sitting allows both the customer and Sato to slow down and enjoy their time together.

This slowing down was what many in-migrants from urban areas had hoped to experience when they moved to the countryside. Yet this curated lifestyle also highlights the tension between entrepreneurship and the pursuit of slowness. Many in-migrant entrepreneurs admitted that starting a business often made their lives just as busy compared to when they were in cities. The next case explores these tensions further by examining how self-sufficiency and work-life balance can be difficult to achieve for rural entrepreneurs.

5.2 Chasing self-sufficiency

5.2.1 Fashion designer balancing work and life

Fashion designer Saori moved to the island of Mukaishima to realize her ideal way of life: building a business that would enable a healthy and self-sufficient lifestyle. The first time I met Saori was at her shop and atelier, located in an *akiya* she purchased after it had been vacant for around three years. Saori chose to buy the place rather than rent and fully

committed herself to transform the building. Using a combination of crowdfunding and savings, Saori renovated the *akiya* into a multi-function space: her residence, a workshop space, a large kitchen on the ground floor for events, a clothing shop and atelier upstairs, and additional retail spaces she rents out to other in-migrants (Figure 5.2). During my fieldwork these tenants included a florist, jewelry designer, and a young in-migrant selling eco-friendly products, all of whom appreciated having a physical space to test and develop their businesses.



Figure 5.2. Saori's shop and atelier with old wooden floorboards sourced online for a vintage look (left). One of the rental spaces for other in-migrants used as a shop (right).

Photo by author, March 27, 2021.

Saori explained to me her concept of self-sufficiency as being defined by caring for the three fundamental aspects of life, known as *ishokujū* (clothing, food, and shelter). As a fashion designer, she wears and makes clothes from organic cotton and sells them in her shop. She tries to eat organic produce where possible and continues to experiment with self-sufficient living, such as installing a bio-toilet. I visited Saori's place several times to participate in events she regularly organizes. On one of these occasions, she hosted a cooking workshop with a friend and fellow I-turner from Ikuchijima island focused on cooking with wild boar (*inoshishi*) meat (Figure 5.3). Wild boars are considered pests as they damage farmland. While some locals trap or hunt them, few eat them regularly. Saori's friend, who

had a hunting license, brought a freshly hunted boar and demonstrated how to butcher and cook it into meat buns, burger patties, grilled steaks, soup, and a variety of other delicious dishes. The 3,000 yen workshop attracted around 15 people, mostly other in-migrants curious to learn more about this overlooked food source. We all squeezed into Saori's workshop space to learn, cook, and eat together.



Figure 5.3. Wild boar cooking workshop at Saori's atelier and residence, the ground floor has an open kitchen often hosting events. Photo by author, October 28, 2021.

Toward the end of my fieldwork, I stayed with Saori for a week, she was looking to expand her business into a guesthouse and welcomed me as a trial guest. Over lunch one day, she shared her motivations and aspirations in more detail. Saori had spent her early 20s working for a large fast-fashion retail company in Tokyo. The 2011 Great East Japan Earthquake prompted her to leave and reconsider both her job and the industry itself. Saori decided to go back to school to learn garment-making, then gained work experience before starting her own label. For two years, she struggled with the business, often working long hours and struggling to pay the bills at times. She was determined not to give up and felt there was no going back. Saori explained:

In Japan, there is a constant ladder you must climb. You must go to a good school to get into a good university, then get a well-paid job, then buy a house and so on. You must keep climbing up constantly. Once you quit at any stage and jump off the ladder, it is hard to go back.

Having “jumped off the ladder,” Saori felt she had to make her business work. Three years into working independently, she began looking for an alternative to city life: “*I wanted a change in scenery, to go somewhere more inaka [countryside], where I could be more self-sufficient and do DIY.*” An acquaintance who had moved to Onomichi had told her about the pleasant climate, cheap rents, and good atmosphere (*ii fun'iki*). After visiting Onomichi to hold a pop-up market there, she was convinced and returned two months later to look for a house. Unlike other in-migrants who usually start by renting a place, Saori had purposefully looked for a house to buy. She was committed to moving and renovating the house into her dream home and atelier. After looking around in Onomichi without success, she eventually purchased a two-story house on the nearby island of Mukaishima and began renovations.

One of the main motivations for Saori to move to the islands was her desire to live a healthy and more balanced life while running her business. After working in the city where rents are high, she was able to afford a large vacant house to create her dream atelier and home. Though she says she enjoys her life much more compared to working in the city, the realities of running a fashion brand proved demanding. When preparing a new collection, she sometimes sews all day, including weekends, while also managing administration, marketing, events, and ongoing renovation. In practice, she is busy, if not busier, than when she lived in the city. Saori says she is interested in farming but has little spare time to dedicate to it. She rents a small *hatake* near her house, but it is her mother who tends to it and does most of the day-to-day cooking. Saori’s mother moved to the islands with her daughter and helps with the business by sewing, while also taking on household tasks such as cooking and cleaning.

In Saori’s case, rather than being “half-farmer, half-X,” the X seems to have taken up almost all of her time and energy. Saori is constantly working on her business, renovating the house and running events that blurred her professional and personal life. Despite her busy schedule, Saori says she feels fulfilled and continues to seek ways to improve her business and lifestyle to become more self-sufficient.

As discussed in Chapter 4, the concept of being a contemporary *hyakushō* juggling multiple jobs illustrates both flexibility and necessity, as diversified income streams compensate for the lack of stable, well-paid employment. Related concepts include *nariwai* similarly challenge the traditional model of having a single “proper” job (*shigoto*), instead encouraging multiple small vocations that draw on a broader range of skills. Yet this transition from working for a company to working for oneself poses challenges in terms of time and boundaries. While some entrepreneurs (like Misa) see freedom of time as the key attraction to becoming entrepreneurs, others find themselves with little personal time as one I-turner running a bookstore told me:

I didn't know how to spend my leisure time when I moved to the island. I found I had to adjust from being a company employee with clear boundaries between work and personal time, whereas now the boundary between work and private life seems to have disappeared. Any free time is either taken up by other work or community activities.

Thus, a key challenge for rural entrepreneurs is to find a balance that works for them. This can be difficult to determine and described as a delicate line between “self-growth vs self-exploitation” (Klien 2019, 77). Nevertheless, the choice to move to the countryside where living costs and start-up costs are lower has been an attractive and strategic step for young in-migrant entrepreneurs.

5.2.2 Sailing for fun and self-reliance

I-turner Rei offers another perspective on self-sufficiency and entrepreneurship. After spending his early 20s living overseas in a city where living costs and rents were rising, he found the islands surprisingly attractive as a place to both live and launch a business:

I can still survive even if I don't make money for the first year or so as the rent is close to nothing and living costs are low. I spent one year setting up my business while I worked part-time and took up odd jobs to pay the bills. It's easier to become an entrepreneur here, as there is less pressure to do well financially, allowing you to work at your own pace.

Rei moved to the Kamijima islands eight years ago, a few years after graduating from university. Having initially visited as a tourist, Rei realized that he could potentially also make a living here on the remote island (*igaini koko de mo shigoto ga dekiru*). He elaborated:

The market may be smaller in rural areas, but the expenses are also low. The cost of living here is only a fraction compared to Tokyo, my rent for example is only 5,000 yen for a whole house large enough for a family. I don't have to worry too much about whether I succeed or not as I can use my savings to cover my cost of living until I build up my business. I also received 200,000 yen to start my business from the town, which allows me to try new ideas and not stress about having to succeed straight away.

Rei has dabbled in many odd jobs over the years before starting a sailing business. He still finds it hard to define what he does for a living in one sentence. His current business was launched after he spent a year hand-building two wooden boats, which he now uses for tours. Recently, he began making bags from recycled sail cloth and has plans to open a co-working space, alongside other ideas. Importantly, he stresses that profit is not his sole motivation (*kasegu tameni bijinesu o suro no kangae ga mo chotto usumatte iku*). Rather, he is interested in getting as many people as possible to experience the “goodness” (*yosa*) of the islands, including the many uninhabited islands that are hard by regular ferry services. Rei also speaks passionately about increasing the resilience of the island residents, especially in times of disaster, by providing another transport option with his boats. During the major storms in 2018, water supplies were disrupted, and ferry services were temporarily halted. The experience sharpened his awareness of the importance of self-sufficiency, including the ability to move around independently. He hopes that his boats can one day contribute to alternative transport options in times of disaster, complementing their role in tourism.

Together, the cases of Saori and Rei reveal that while the countryside may lower financial barriers to entrepreneurship, it does not reduce the labor involved. Rather, it allows young in-migrants to experiment with forms of self-sufficiency and self-expression that are less attainable in the city, albeit with ongoing tensions around time, boundaries, and sustainability.

5.3 Resilience in times of crisis

The themes of self-reliance and resilience became a recurring topic during conversations with young entrepreneurs. A growing body of research links entrepreneurship to increased resilience in rural communities (Apostolopoulos et al. 2019; Imperiale and Vanclay 2016; Li et al. 2019; Morrison et al. 2017; Qu and Zollet 2023; Stathopoulou et al. 2004; Steiner and Atterton 2014). Due to its place-specific nature, rural entrepreneurship has long been framed as a driver of local development as “entrepreneurs respond, as large organizations cannot, to the skills of local workers and to the local values embedded in both production and consumption patterns and routines” (Malecki 1993, 121). In this sense, rural entrepreneurship is often seen to have the potential to increase community resilience owing to both its social and economic benefits built from their local embeddedness as well as nonlocal connections from their previous experiences (Wang et al. 2022). Some studies suggest that rural businesses can be more adaptable during crises than their urban counterparts as they have several advantages, including “the ability to react quickly to market opportunities, a willingness to accept risk, and the power to communicate efficiently and informally” (Malecki 1993, 122).

When I arrived at the islands in January 2021, the lingering effects of COVID-19 were still there. I was recommended to quarantine for two weeks. Restaurants were still operating but mainly on a takeout basis and everyone wore masks when leaving the house. Li et al. (2019, 138) argue that while factors such as favorable geographic location, presence of natural resources, and provision of infrastructure can play a factor in whether an area declines or thrive, success is largely determined by the actions of local actors: “For the future success of revitalizing declining rural communities, the actions and commitment of the people who live there and their collective self-reliance are increasingly called upon to shape and maintain their own living quality.” The authors further stress the importance of rural resilience as measured by the rural residents’ changes in behavior and adaptation to new circumstances without being overly dependent on unmanageable external forces.

5.3.1 Doing business during a pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic offered a critical test of such adaptive capacities on the islands. Since the first positive case of COVID-19 was discovered in January 2020, infections spread in Japan and led to the implementation of social distancing practices. The Japanese

government issued a “state of emergency” for seven prefectures including Tokyo, Osaka, and Fukuoka on April 7, 2020, which lasted until May 25, 2020. Unlike many countries, Japan did not enforce any mandatory lockdowns and instead relied on self-restraint from individuals and businesses. On the islands where there was a large proportion of older adults, local municipalities followed the lead of the government and urged people to stay home. Festivals, events, and other activities involving large groups were canceled.

Although closures were not legally enforced, most shops and guesthouses suspended operations during the state of emergency, including Mai, who shut her café:

Although there were no strict lockdowns the local towns urged people to close voluntarily, and most people agreed as the community is small it is important to keep the “wa” [harmony].

Mai explained that there were some mixed feelings as small businesses needed to make money, but everyone felt the pressure to follow everyone else due to the small community. I-turners like herself were especially conscious, as they did not wish to be the ones to blame for bringing the virus onto the islands:

Most shops by long-term residents cater to local people on the islands and are not as affected. But as a new in-migrant, we tend to cater to visitors and tourists more, so there is some pressure if we stay open and then attract outsiders that may be a source of the virus, so most shops and guesthouses opened by in-migrants voluntarily closed.

Interviews with other business owners revealed that in the two months of April and May 2020, when the state of emergency urged businesses to close, those who operated tourism-related entrepreneurs were the worst affected, experiencing up to a 70% reduction in income. Guesthouses dependent on external visitors saw a 50–60% drop in income. Dining and food establishments recorded losses of around 30–60%, while agriculture-related businesses reported smaller but still significant drops of 15–40%. Conversely, freelancers such as writers, editors, and designers, and others whose work could shift online, sometimes experienced increased demand. To help alleviate the financial pressure, some towns introduced subsidies for small businesses. Mai and other in-migrant entrepreneurs received support to offset part of their losses.

Despite this financial support, some islanders felt it was hard to offer mutual support due to the social distancing required. Residents told me how this crisis was different from previous disasters and was more challenging to respond to:

It seems it is not easy to help each other in terms of business during the pandemic but when the water stopped during the torrential rains [in 2018], everyone opened their wells to the public and we [guesthouse owners] also opened our baths in our guesthouse for the public to use.

Another interlocutor echoed this sentiment:

In the 2018 disaster due to the heavy rain, people in the community supported one another and we came out of the disaster together. From that experience, I believe that there is a strong community. However, with COVID-19, due to factors such as the interaction between people being limited, the existence of many elderly people in the community, the lack of adequate medical facilities/systems, and ease of false information spreading, I am worried we won't form a strong connection in the community like we did with the [previous] disaster

One notable example of adaptive, community-oriented entrepreneurship during the pandemic was the work of Hitomi, a former town hall employee who runs a café and broader revitalization initiative built around local resources on the island of Yuge. Her business employs 12 staff, many of them young in-migrants who had little to no connections to the island. The café has become an entry point for newcomers, offering part-time jobs and a space to get to know locals before starting their own business or finding more permanent work. Through her contacts and deep knowledge of the community, Hitomi helps new in-migrants find employment and places to live by introducing relevant contacts and vacant houses that become available for rent through word of mouth. She was one of the locals who helped me to find an *akiya* to rent though I ultimately chose to stay at a local guest house instead.

I chatted with Hitomi about her experiences of running a business during the pandemic. She said her customers at the café decreased by half. However, she was able to keep afloat by pivoting to address community needs. As the vulnerability of elderly people was a major concern for the island community during the pandemic, Hitomi provided meal delivery services not only to provide food to vulnerable but also to check up on them:

I deliver bentos to elderly residents and check up on them. Some elderly cannot go shopping so this is an essential service to make their life easier. Due to COVID-19 their children can't come back and visit them, so it's important to care for them.

Hitomi's activities exemplify a community-oriented business. Terms such as "social entrepreneurship" and "community business entrepreneurship" have been used to describe entrepreneurs who are "change agents," valuing social benefits to the broader community over personal profit (Johnstone and Lionais 2004; Lang and Fink 2019; Steiner and Atterton 2015). Despite the challenges faced during the pandemic, most entrepreneurs I spoke with felt that there was little change in daily life other than reducing the number of large gatherings and wearing masks. The small scale of businesses and relatively low living costs meant most owners could survive the temporary closures.

5.3.2 Small and mobile bakery

Another entrepreneur who adapted to the pandemic and even expanded their business is Fumiko, a U-turner in her early 40s who runs a small bakery on Yuge (Figure 5.4). At the start of the state of emergency, Fumiko closed her shop from April 2020 until the end of May, then reopened and began experimenting with mobile pop-up sales. In March 2021, I joined her on a mobile sales trip to Uoshima, one of the more remote islands that was about 40-minutes away by ferry. On the ferry, Fumiko told me how she came to start her business.



Figure 5.4. The house and bakery sit by an empty lot that Fumiko rents to use for customers and island gatherings. Photo by author, March 14, 2021.

Fumiko was living in a nearby city when she inherited her father's old wooden house on Yuge island. A little over 10 years ago, she decided to move to Yuge, trading city life for island living, and settled into the old family home. Her husband could work remotely as a freelancer and was supportive of the decision to relocate. Like many other in-migrants, she initially took on part-time work as a hotel receptionist while raising her young children, with no intention of starting a business. Baking had been a hobby for her Fumiko, and she often shared homemade treats with friends. When one friend suggested she try selling them, it inspired her to renovate part of the house into a small bakery. The bakery and residence, located in a quiet residential area near the sea, is renovated from the original traditional folk house now over 100 years old and has been designated as *bunkazai* (a cultural property). Since opening in 2015, it has become popular with both locals and tourists, often selling out well before closing time.

Fumiko runs the bakery entirely on her own. She usually opens three days a week, every other day, waking up around 4 am to make fresh bread. A hand-drawn calendar on the glass window announces opening days for the month; she also uses Instagram to share updates and take pre-orders. The bakery mostly offers takeout services, with limited seating inside. During the pandemic, Fumiko transformed an empty lot opposite her bakery into an outdoor dining space, which also serves as bicycle parking for visiting cyclists. The rent for this empty plot of land is only 10,000 yen per year. Fumiko is content with keeping her running costs low by not employing any staff and keeping overheads low, decisions that help her retain flexibility and financial resilience.

Fumiko explained that after she closed her shop for a few weeks, she was able to have some unexpected downtime. She could relax and get more into gardening, as she had started to grow vegetables at another vacant plot near her house. Having no staff to pay, she was not worried about money. Instead, she had time to think about how she could adapt to the pandemic situation and came up with the idea of starting mobile sales: if customers could not easily reach her shop, she would go to them. A carpenter friend helped her make some wooden shelves fitted into the back of her car and she soon started to drive around the island to parking at key locations, such as the local high school, to sell her baked goods after the state of emergency ended.

She soon expanded her reach to other islands in the area. On the trip I joined, we traveled to Uoshima, an island with a population of just over 100, with no bakery or

supermarket (Figure 5.5). Sharing the ferry with a mobile supermarket van, we arrived to find residents waiting at the port. Fumiko quickly sold out her bagels, muffins, and breads, including pre-orders placed via social media. The mobile supermarket was also popular, as people stocked up on everyday goods and vegetables. Both Fumiko's mobile bakery and the supermarket also visited the local nursing home where residents and staff could purchase the goods. The town mayor was present to show his support and purchased some bread from Fumiko as well. Fumiko told me that the town is encouraging mobile sales, especially to remote islands. She is planning to make the trip to Uoshima island every month.



Figure 5.5. Mobile bakery with custom made shelves at the back of car. Photo by author, February 10, 2021.

I stayed in contact with Fumiko and would often visit her bakery to pick up delicious baked goods. On weekends there was often a line forming before opening. A few months after the state of emergency, Fumiko began renting out part of her living space for events such as small group yoga classes to supplement her income and to offer a space for gatherings during a time when larger events remained restricted. The yoga teacher, a young U-turner from the neighboring island of Iwagi, had recently returned after spending a few years in the city. Fumiko helped to advertise the yoga classes to her bakery customers and connected them to the yoga teacher. In one class I attended, a participant from Uoshima we met a few weeks earlier told me she had first discovered Fumiko through the mobile bakery

visit. These small social encounters illustrate how entrepreneurial initiatives, be it mobile sales, shared spaces, or collaborative events, help maintain social ties and create new ones even amid a global health crisis.

5.3.3 Entrepreneurship in the postpandemic age

In the early stages of the pandemic, academic and media articles speculated on the potential increase in urban-rural migration driven by the rise of telework and a renewed desire for nature and space. For instance, the national newspaper *Mainichi Shinbun* published an article titled “More People Moving to Rural Areas Across Japan as New Lifestyles Emerge due to Virus,” featuring young workers leaving Tokyo thanks to remote work (Motohashi and Matsuoka 2020). Some ended their leases to adopt a nomadic lifestyle, while others returned to rural hometown while keeping their existing job. In a July 2020 article titled “Will the Coronavirus Pandemic Boost Rural Relocation in Japan?,” Anthony Rausch (2020) calls the new movement a “corona shift,” to describe people rethinking outdated corporate office culture and considering rural relocation for environmental and health reasons.

On the island of Innoshima, one couple in their late 20s, Eri and Shin, explicitly cited the pandemic as a major factor in their decision to relocate. They described themselves as “accidental entrepreneurs” after moving to the countryside a few months into the pandemic. With few prior contacts, they soon found themselves welcomed into both the young migrant and older farming communities. After looking for a small plot of land to grow some vegetables for self-sufficiency, they stumbled upon a piece of abandoned citrus farm. Although they had not planned to farm, the pair decided to rent and rehabilitate the land. In the first year, they sold some fruit and processed the rest into juice. With no previous farming experience, they learned from neighboring farmers and became a part of the local community in the process. Eri explained the importance of farming as an entry into the community:

I moved to the island due to COVID-19 allowing me to work remotely. I mostly work online and didn't have a chance to interact with the local people until I started to work on the farm. There I met local grandmas and grandpas who taught us how to farm and introduced vacant houses to us. I don't think I would have made friends with the older locals if I hadn't started farming.

I saw Eri and Shin several times during my fieldwork as we frequented the same cafés and events on the island. One time we met at a mutual friend's café, where I saw Eri arriving

on her stylish Dutch-branded electric bicycle. We bonded after finding out that we were the same age. Eri, who had lived in the United States for a year and spoke good English, shared a trajectory similar to Yuri's in Chapter 4. She had moved to Tokyo to study law, partly to meet parental expectations and because law was seen as advantageous in the job market. After graduation, she worked briefly but soon quit, finding the work dull. She spent a year abroad working in hospitality, then returned to Japan and continued in the same sector in a small town before shifting to digital marketing in Tokyo. Trained on the job, she advanced quickly but began to feel the need to slow down as she approached her thirties.

Originally from Hiroshima Prefecture, J-turner Eri was drawn to the Shimanami region because it was close to her hometown. Living in Tokyo, she had observed that the island region was an up-and-coming area with many newcomers in recent years. Once the pandemic hit, her company allowed people to work completely online which prompted Eri to move. Studying a map and not wishing to go somewhere “too rural,” Eri and her partner chose Innoshima as it was one of the larger islands with a supermarket, drugstore, and other shops—amenities she thought were essential to daily living. After moving, Eri described feeling the same sense of freshness and excitement she had experienced when moving overseas. Initially, they rented an apartment as information on *akiya* was limited. A few months later, after befriending local farmers, they were introduced to an *akiya* they liked and are now planning to renovate it into a guesthouse to complement their farm.

Recalling the *hyakushō* concept from Chapter 4, I listened to Eri tell me how her activities change with the seasons. In summer, when there is less farm work, she takes on more digital marketing work. She has since gone freelance and enjoys the flexibility to manage her workload and schedule. After making contacts and friends in the area she has started to collaborate with local businesses, helping them promote their products and services. For now, the farm turns no profit and is “purely for fun,” while her marketing job pays the bills. Yet taking over the farm has changed her outlook. Before, she would constantly want to explore and live in new places; now she is drawn to building a base on the island and traveling outside for shorter periods as she has a place of her own to return to. Eri and Shin's entrepreneurial dream is to grow the farm and guesthouse into a profitable venture that can eventually employ others, allowing them both to maintain mobility while keeping the island as their home base.

These postpandemic narratives do not reveal a simple “corona shift” in which telework straightforwardly produces permanent rural relocation. Rather, they highlight how crises such as COVID-19 intersect with longer-term trends discussed in earlier chapters: young people seeking alternatives to conventional career ladders, experimenting with multiple livelihoods, and negotiating the tensions between self-realization and self-exploitation. Entrepreneurship emerges as both a strategy for individual self-making and a potential tool for collective resilience, but its outcomes are uneven, contingent, and deeply embedded in local social relations.

5.4 Rural areas as places of opportunity

One of my youngest interlocutors, Sora, in his early 20s, summarized the main opportunities currently available to young people in the area: 1) salaried office jobs in the town hall or other local businesses, 2) traditional jobs in agriculture, fisheries, or shipbuilding, 3) minimum-wage part-time jobs in supermarkets, restaurants, or aged care facilities, or 4) starting their own business.

Sora’s family made an I-turn to Yuge when he was still in high school. He completed his studies at the local high school, which now has only around 80 students, and chose to stay on the islands after graduation rather than attend university or find work outside the islands. He is one of the rare cases who did not leave after high school as there is no university on the islands. At the time of our interview, Sora was working with a local fisherman and was also involved in the seaweed industry. He noted that jobs in traditional industries have declined and are often understaffed with a lack of young people willing to take over. His current job pays relatively well by local standards, but he admits it is also tough and not something he wishes to continue long-term:

You can live a comfortable life here if you do not mind working in traditional industries such as fishing and farming. The pay is not bad as well, around 3 million yen a year for my current job as a fisherman. I have saved a lot of money as living costs are low and recently bought a vacant house, which I plan to renovate in the future. I am planning to quit my current job soon because it is a tough industry with little flexibility, as it depends on the weather and seasons. You only get a break if the weather is bad.

Sora values the low living costs, he has already been able to purchase an *akiya*, but he also desires greater autonomy over his time. His job requires him to work on weekends whenever the weather is good, leaving little flexibility. Thinking about his future, Sora is completing an IT course online and has plans to transition out of fishing once he has a clearer idea of what he wants to do. His current job choice as a fisherman was a case of doing something that did not particularly interest him in the long run but provided a stable income. For young high school graduates like Sora, the islands may seem to lack opportunities with limited job offerings. By contrast, for in-migrants coming from outside or those who had returned after time away with work experience and accumulated social and cultural capital, the same limited job market becomes a catalyst for them to be creative and create new opportunities. Lacking attractive salaried positions, many see entrepreneurship as the most viable, and appealing, path.

As discussed earlier, starting one's business is often framed as jumping off the conventional corporate ladder one had to climb when living in the cities. The postwar model of lifetime employment and the stability it provided has been steadily eroded (Kawano et al. 2014; Shibata 2020), weakening the expectation that young people should follow a single, linear career path. This broader shift opens space for alternative life courses (Mathews and White 2003), including rural entrepreneurship as both livelihood and lifestyle choice.

The chart below visualizes the diverse motivations of the 62 interviewees that had informed their decision to relocate to the islands (Figure 5.5). The x-axis captures the various reasons cited by interviewees. Like the chart mapping diversity of livelihoods in Chapter 4, many had various reasons to move as seen in the lines connecting two or more dots. The colored shapes further group interviewees based on their main motivation: nine were U-turners driven to start new businesses while three worked regular jobs; eleven were displaced urbanites escaping the city due to the high cost of living (many from this group cited the availability of *akiya* as a reason for their decision to relocate); ten were motivated by health concerns and wished to pursue self-sufficiency; eight sought livelihood opportunities in rural areas, such as starting a business or taking up local employment; seven wished to escape work stress or pursue temporary downtime from the city; seven followed partners or family members; and four were driven by social or community factors, such as the desire to live in a close-knit and supportive environment.

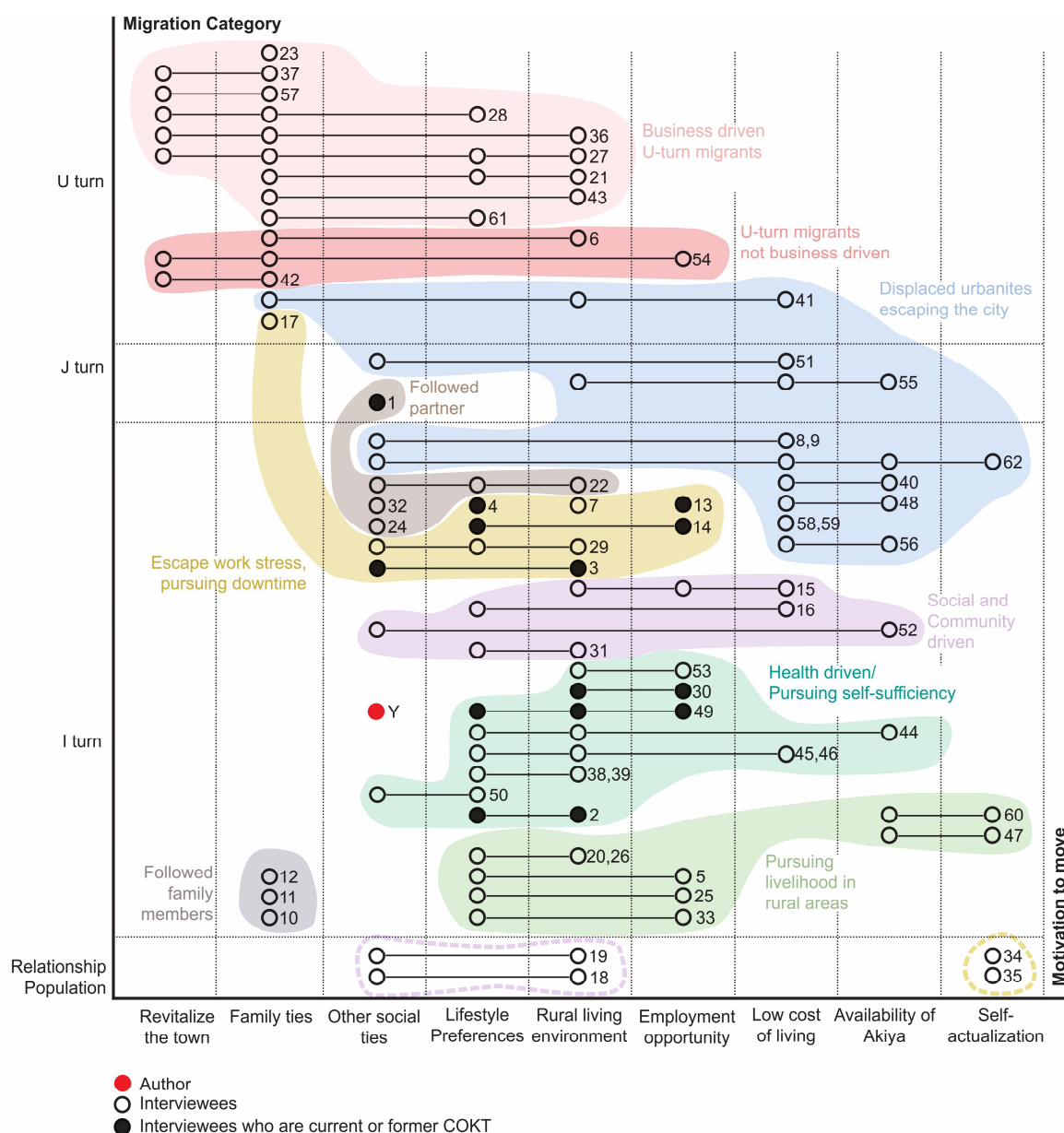


Figure 5.5. Motivation of interviewees behind their decision to relocate.

As of June 2025, there were nine interviewees I knew of who had since moved out of the islands (Interviewees no. 2, 4, 7, 13, 14, 30, 33, 43, and 62). Four were I-turners who had originally moved to escape the stress of city life, including three COKT participants who had completed their term. Another four left due to conflicts within the community, including two breakups with partners. Those who remained and were satisfied with their current rural lives were also open to moving elsewhere in the future, noting that they now had more choices and greater mobility.

For aspiring entrepreneurs, the relatively low cost of housing (including the availability of *akiya*) and everyday living made rural areas easier to try something new. Rei, the young migrant who started a sailing business, explained, “The market may be smaller, but the expenses are also low, it is possible to start a new business without much capital making it easy to try new ideas.”

Another similarly reflected that cheap rent reduced the pressure to succeed quickly: “I would not have been able to start this business where I lived previously as the financial burdens would have been too great. The rent and living expenses are cheap here and I can cover them from my savings until I build up my business.” The relatively affordable conditions allow entrepreneurs to experiment and continuously evolve their businesses until they find what worked for them. In addition, the use of social networks and social media platforms like Instagram extends their reach beyond the islands, enabling them to cultivate customers, collaborators, and reputations beyond the local population.

For many of my interlocutors, entrepreneurship has allowed them to express themselves and reassert their identity in addition to obtaining a livelihood. The type of business one chose was reflective of one’s passions and motivations: Misa’s café, for example, was driven by her wish to create a “comfortable place” to gather rather than only selling goods for profit. This is reaffirmed in the types of activities carried out, such as the different types of events in-migrant entrepreneurs engage in as an extension of their business ranging from workshops, pop-up markets, and farm tours, which all function as vehicles for building social connection and a sense of community.

In addition, the tangible spaces and environment shaped by entrepreneurs, such as the renovation of *akiya* into cafés, shops, ateliers, guesthouses, and multi-use spaces can be read as the physical manifestation of entrepreneurial projects and identities. The entrepreneurial activities of migrants offer individuals the opportunity to “construct a sense of existential meaning at a personal level” (Traphagan 2020, 16), reshaping both their own lives and their environment. At the same time, the virtual realm also plays an important role not only for entrepreneurs to market their businesses and reach a wider audience, but to collectively sketch out a new aesthetic of rural areas: aesthetically curated images of renovated interiors, carefully styled food, and picturesque landscapes circulate online, reinforcing and amplifying new representations of the rural as tasteful, creative, and cool. The aesthetics of

entrepreneurship, often built around the reuse of old buildings, is a recognizable trend, yet remains underexplored in existing scholarship.

5.5 Chapter summary

This chapter has examined the various life experiences of young migrants that have led to them becoming entrepreneurs in the countryside. Most of the entrepreneurs discussed are not especially wealthy and often cited that the low cost of living on the islands had enabled them to try and start something new. For some, the 2011 Great East Japan Earthquake was a catalyst, prompting them to do what they wanted now rather than wait. For others, including those whose moves coincided with the COVID-19 pandemic, remote work and broader shifts in corporate culture opened new options.

As part of their life on the islands, young in-migrants experiment with various ways to make a living while also seeing entrepreneurship as a vehicle for self-expression and for constructing alternative life courses beyond the traditional corporate ladder. However, the process is challenging as entrepreneurial projects can be demanding, leading to the recurring challenge of negotiating time and boundaries. Many interlocutors described the blurring of work and life in entrepreneurial contexts where friends double as collaborators, weekends are filled with events and workshops, and domestic spaces are partially open to customers. In-migrants like Sayuri were passionate about self-sufficiency yet struggled to obtain it as time-intensive work like farming competes with the demands of sustaining a small business leaving her little free time.

This chapter has shown that entrepreneurship, like migration, is an ongoing, iterative process rather than a fixed endpoint. In-migrant entrepreneurs continue to adjust their activities in response to changing personal circumstances and external factors, including major events like the COVID-19 pandemic. These dynamics connect rural entrepreneurship to broader debates about community resilience. The ability to adapt and respond to change is a key indicator of resilience, defined as “the existence, development, and engagement of community resources by community members to thrive in an environment characterized by change, uncertainty, unpredictability, and surprise” (Magis 2010, 402). Observations on the ground showed that most in-migrants displayed a high level of resilience and impacts from COVID-19 have mostly been limited to financial loss for businesses that depended on customers from outside. The small size of businesses, the low cost of living, along with

multiple income streams proved beneficial in times of crisis. High levels of social capital further allowed people to draw on supportive networks in times of need.

This mentality extends to the everyday. An interlocutor used the term *tomodachi keizai* (friend economy) to describe the practice of purchasing goods and services from friends who were fellow in-migrants as a way to sustain mutual livelihoods. Related concepts include *zōyo keizai* (gift economy), in contrast to *shijō keizai* (market economy). Philosopher Daisuke Araya (2024) goes further to introduce a vision of Gift Economy 2.0, where goods and services circulate rather than money and where unpaid value such as housework is socially recognized (Araya 2024).

This sentiment is also seen in collective *akiya* renovation where time consuming and challenging work is taken on collectively. The next chapter delves more deeply into *akiya* renovation projects and how they depend on and generate networks of mutual help. It focuses on the transformation of *akiya* by in-migrants and their collaborators, examining how *akiya* renovation becomes a form of placemaking that is simultaneously social and spatial. By tracing the concrete practices of renovation and reuse, the chapter shows how in-migrants quite literally rebuild the countryside, contributing to the ongoing refashioning of rural landscapes.

Chapter 6: Renovating the countryside

This chapter examines the rising number of *akiya* and how young in-migrants are repurposing them through renovation and adaptive reuse. Japan now has the highest housing vacancy among all OECD countries (Kanayama and Sadayuki 2021). *Akiya*, together with *akichi* (vacant land), are visible signs of shrinkage and depopulation: shuttered shops, closed schools, empty homes, and abandoned farmland are common sights across rural and peripheral regions. The 2015 Population Census showed that 39 out of 47 prefectures and 1,419 out of 1,719 municipalities experienced population loss between 2010 and 2015 (Inoue et al. 2022).

The proliferation and ongoing challenge with *akiya* have led to the situation being referred to as the *akiya mondai* (vacant house problem). A key challenge in reusing *akiya* is that many have become dilapidated to the point of requiring major work done to make them habitable. Most *akiya* have been left in poor condition with belongings and furniture still inside requiring considerable work to clean and dispose of items. Despite these conditions, an increasing number of people, including in-migrants, are choosing to renovate *akiya*. With limited budgets, many are doing a large portion of the work themselves with the help of friends, volunteers, and other amateurs.

I argue that this trend of collective *akiya* renovation reflects shifting values among the younger generation who are searching for ways to live outside a growth-oriented society. The active participation of volunteers who are motivated to join renovation activities for social and other noneconomic reasons has led to the emergence of alternative economies of exchange rooted in reciprocity and mutual aid. By prioritizing social relations over profit, these collaborative DIY renovation practices are forming new communities on the islands and beyond. Some participants consider themselves activists who strive to create a new kind of commons in leftover and overlooked rural spaces by viewing *akiya* not as a burden but a valuable existing resource with untapped potential.

This chapter first gives a brief overview of the *akiya mondai* (vacant house problem) before presenting three case studies of collective renovation initiatives encountered during my fieldwork.

6.1 The paradox of vacant houses

As of October 1 2023, the total number of *akiya* in Japan exceeded 9 million, resulting in a vacancy rate of 13.8% (MIC 2024b). This is nearly double the 4.5 million recorded in 1993. The MIC (2024b) classifies *akiya* into four categories: 1) houses for rent, 2) houses for sale, 3) secondary residences (such as holiday houses), and 4) long-term vacant houses that do not fall into any of the above. The 2023 survey (MIC 2024b) shows that nearly half of all *akiya* were for rent (49.2%). A further 3.8 million (42.8%) were not advertised or accounted for. Only around 380,000 (4.3%) were used as secondary residences, and around 326,000 (3.6%) were listed for sale. Projections indicate that the vacancy rate may reach 30.4% by 2033 (Nomura Research Institute 2016).

The rising number of *akiya* exposes a structural paradox. Japan's postwar housing model was conceived at a time of high economic expansion, population growth, and the nuclear family—all of which no longer hold in today's postgrowth context. Japan's housing system and society are facing more precarious economic conditions as an increasing number of young people without secure employment are finding it harder to obtain property. The shrinking middle class and the traditional nuclear family model are also eroding with the rise of single-person households and single-parent families. Despite a declining population, the government and construction sector continue to build new homes that are not affordable for many. This results in an illogical cycle: new construction continues while the number of residents falls, accelerating the proliferation of *akiya*.

A second paradox lies in transfer of ownership. In many cases, the owners of *akiya* are untraceable, making it impossible to legally acquire the property. Before 2024, it was not mandatory to register a change in ownership details and there were few repercussions for not doing so. Sometimes the heirs themselves are not aware that they have inherited property, reflecting a weakening of family ties in contemporary society (Nozawa 2022). In other cases, properties pass to numerous heirs simultaneously, all of whom must agree before a sale or transfer is possible. This can be problematic to trace them all and obtain permission from all co-owners. One interlocutor described spending over two years collecting signatures from more than ten heirs before he could legally purchase an *akiya*.

Even when newcomers are eager to renovate *akiya*, legal uncertainty can pose risks. DIY contracts, verbal agreements, or handshake deals are common in the countryside. I have

come across cases where in-migrants who have invested time and money in renovating *akiya* only to be asked to vacate when the legal owners changed their minds and wanted their *akiya* back. Such situations resemble Heller's (1998) "tragedy of the anticommons," where multiple overlapping rights prevent productive use of a scarce resource.

6.2 Young in-migrants and vacant house renovation

The widespread phenomenon of *akiya* has been covered extensively in the media, including a growing number of articles in English. English-language articles routinely sensationalize the affordability of rural Japanese houses, with headlines such as "In Japan, a Countryside Home Could Be Yours for Under \$500" (Nelson 2021). YouTubers and influencers have appeared documenting their process of purchasing and transforming *akiya*, contributing to a cultural imaginary of accessible rural living.

One widely viewed example is Australian content creator Jaya, whose 2019 video about buying and renovation a farmhouse in rural Ibaraki Prefecture has nearly 4 million views. Jaya explained that the vacancy rate in Ibaraki Prefecture was 14.6%, but only a fraction of *akiya* were actually for sale—56% were for rent, 36% were long-abandoned, and 5% used as secondary residences, leaving only 3% available on the market. After an extended search, he eventually found an old abandoned *kominka* (farmhouse) for sale through a newspaper advertisement for 3 million yen and invested another AUD 250,000 to renovate it. Jaya framed the project as his way of achieving the "Australian dream" of owning a home with land, which he felt was unattainable in his home country due to rising costs: "I do feel like I've managed to get the Australia dream (owning your own home on a block of land) here in Japan" (Scherer 2023).

Another in-migrant I spoke to who was born and raised in Tokyo with no experience of living in the countryside said the remote island he moved to felt like a foreign country when he first arrived. He described how the "inconvenience" (*fuben-sa*) and "incompleteness" (*mikansei-sa*) of island life encouraged creativity and resourcefulness—repairing and using what was available rather than mindlessly buying more things. With fresh eyes and perspectives, newcomers discover undervalued resources and assets such as *akiya*, empty schools and shuttered shops. They are placemakers who are capable of "re-examining the value of these local assets and propose alternative ways to use them for both business and community purposes" (Florentin et al. 2023, 114).

Figure 6.1 shows that, out of the 62 interviewees, only nine were not using an *akiya* in any form. 38 had renovated *akiya* through DIY means, 27 *akiya* had been renovated into businesses, 12 had been converted from private to hybrid use (e.g., house + business), 20 *akiya* remained unrenovated, eight interviewees had volunteered on other people's *akiya* renovations, and four had converted *akiya* from private to community use. In total, approximately 60 percent were involved in *akiya* renovation in some capacity.

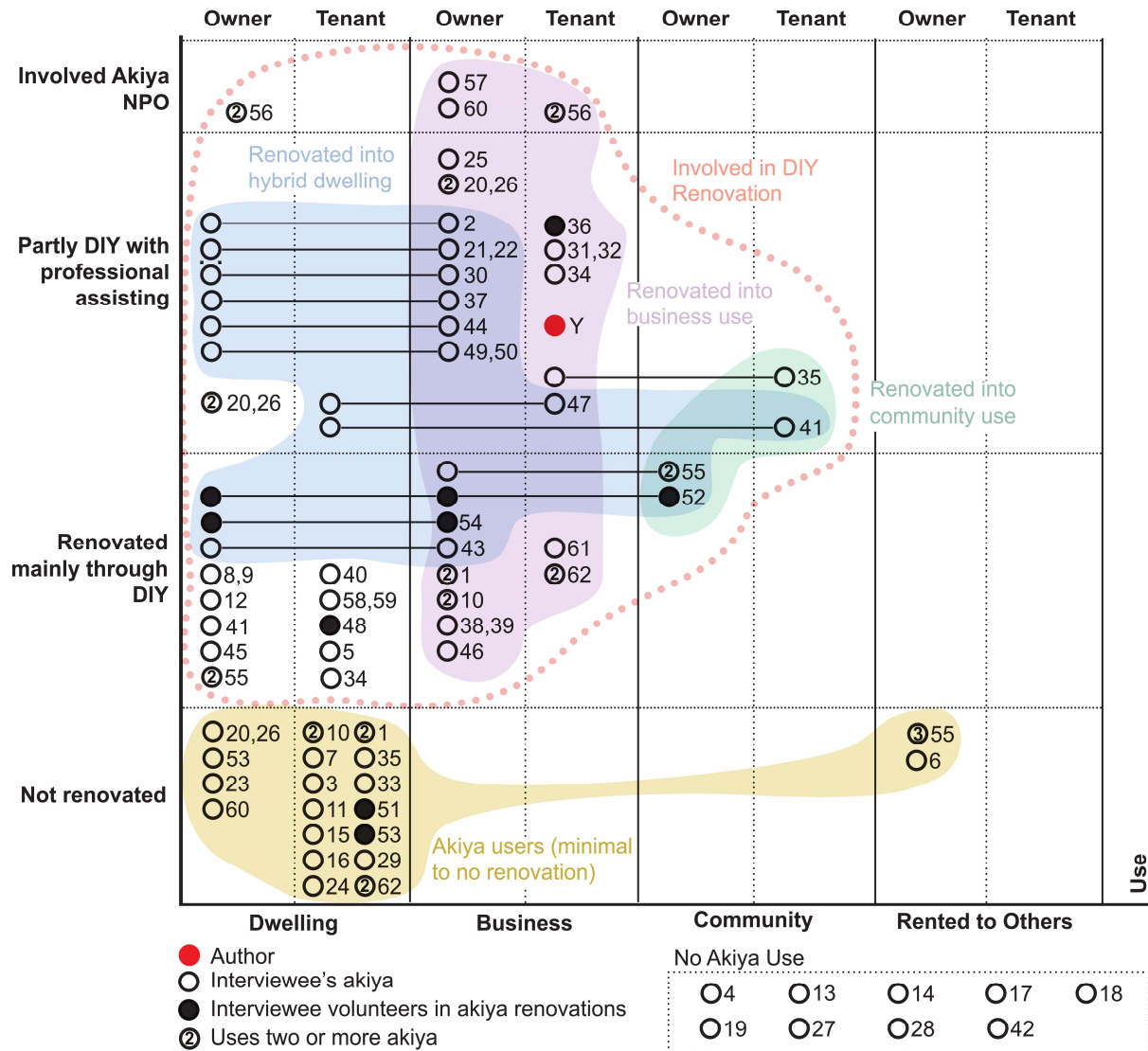


Figure 6.1. Interviewees and *akiya* renovation.

Though *akiya* renovation is a popular choice among in-migrants, not all were interested or involved. In my analysis of my overlaying interviewee's motivation, livelihood, and *akiya* involvement together, some tendencies emerged (Figure 6.2). In-migrants who said their motivation was mainly to escape work stress were less likely to live in an *akiya* or

renovate them as they are not planning to stay long term. U-turners who had no desire to start businesses also rarely participated in renovation. On the other hand, entrepreneurs comprising both I-turners and U-turners were the largest group to rent, own and renovate *akiya*. Displaced urbanites who cited the high cost of living in the city all used *akiya* in some form. In-migrants who were health driven and pursuing self-sufficiency also renovated *akiya* to live and work in. This shows that *akiya* are not only serving the purpose of housing those pushed out of the cities due to high living costs but also providing a place for new businesses and in-migrants to realize their ideal way of life.

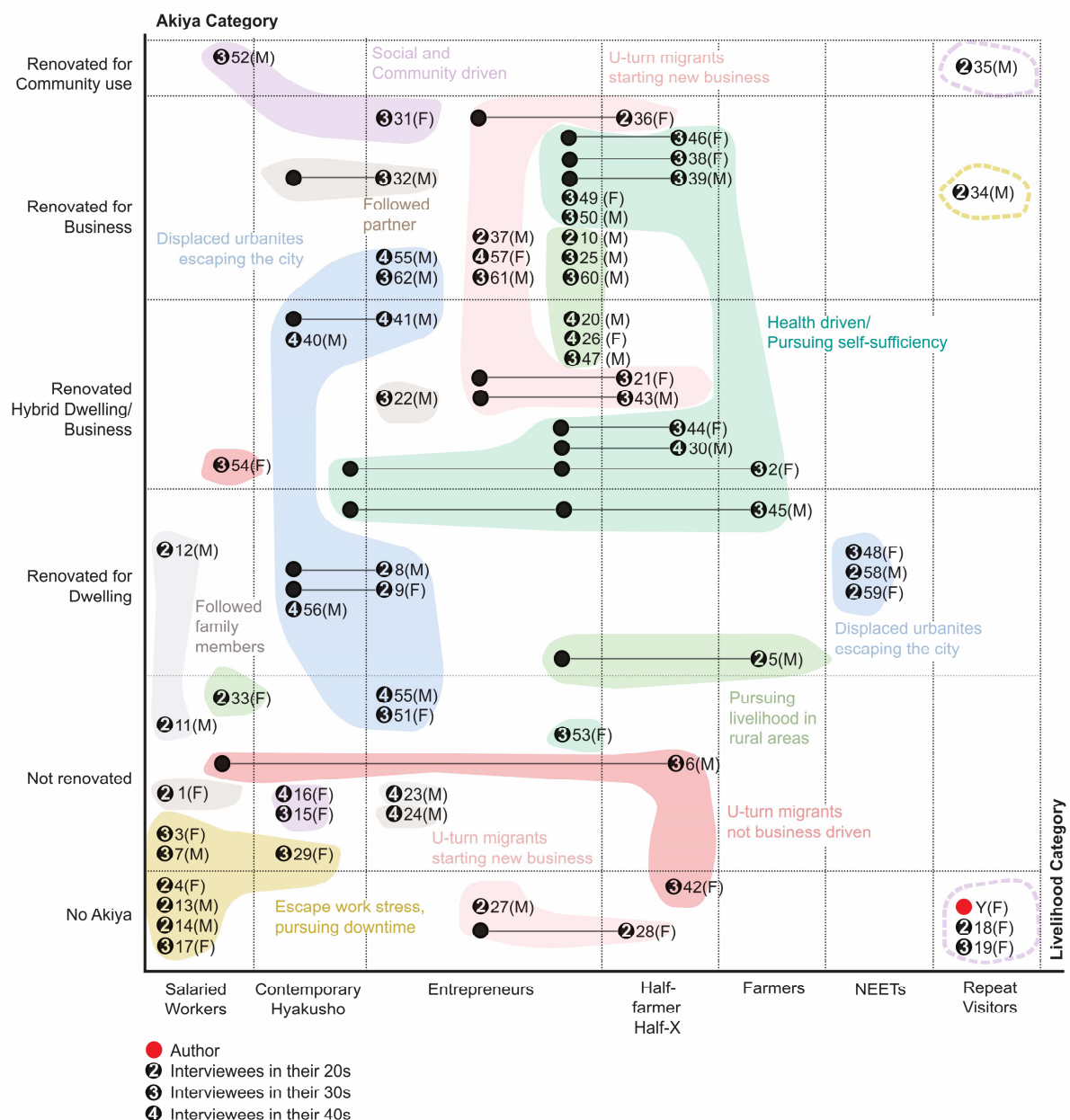


Figure 6.2. Motivation, livelihood, and *akiya* categories of interviewees.

In recent years, a rising number of aspiring entrepreneurs including international in-migrants, have moved to the islands and are renovating *akiya* to start new businesses. A couple from the United States, the Bentons, had moved to the island of Omishima after obtaining a start-up visa aimed at supporting foreigners to start a business. At the time the couple applied for the visa, only certain areas in Japan were eligible, including Imabari City, where Omishima is located. Drawn by the visa eligibility, mild climate, and rising tourism, they relocated in early 2023. The pair purchased an *akiya* that had been abandoned for 10 years for USD 9,000 (USD 7,500 for the house itself, which was 1,000,000 yen, and USD 1,500 in transaction fees). They then spent the next six months renovating it into Airbnb guest accommodation, doing most of the work themselves with the help of local contractors, which cost another USD 29,000.

A few months later, they purchased a second *akiya* to turn into their primary residence and small farm. The Bentons' YouTube channel documents their renovation process and farming activities, including beekeeping and honey-making. Other than the fact that the husband can speak some Japanese, the pair cited affordability as a key factor for choosing Japan: "We liked aspects of our life in the city, but over time, we realized how much we wanted a more rural, self-sufficient existence. We couldn't afford to do something at the scale we wanted in the US, so we decided to dream big and look at other countries" (Benton 2024). For both Jaya and the Bentons, while the house purchase price was low, renovation required substantial financial and labor investment, an important nuance often missing from media narratives.

Stories of successful *akiya* purchases often obscure the difficulties newcomers face. The Bentons, for instance, gained personal introductions from an Airbnb host on the island who introduced them to local business owners and *akiya* owners. The *akiya* they eventually bought was not listed online publicly. They had to go there and view it in person only after building relationships with a local who was open to helping international in-migrants. In other regions, it can be hard to access *akiya* as an outsider.

Thus, though there is demand and interest for *akiya* in certain areas, it can be difficult for newcomers to find suitable houses or obtain permission to use them, leading to a case of "houses without people and people without houses" (Gentili and Hoekstra 2019). Despite high vacancy rates, newcomers often struggle to find available or accessible *akiya* due to several barriers. Many owners do not put their houses up for rent or sale as some owners may

not feel comfortable allowing new residents they do not know into the community. I often heard stories from in-migrants who said they were able to successfully rent or buy an *akiya* only after being introduced by someone from the community, through word of mouth, or by walking around the area and talking to neighbors who helped them contact the owners. In some cases, in-migrants spoke of how they struggled to find available *akiya* due to the influx of newcomers to the area who had already taken most of the desirable *akiya*, leaving only those that require extensive work or ones where no one knows the owner.

These contradictions highlight the spatial unevenness of both population decline and *akiya* reuse. While population decline is widespread nationally, its impacts vary regionally where major cities like Tokyo continue to concentrate population (Xu et al. 2024). Rural in-migration is also uneven and often clustered around certain areas with strong amenities, tourism flows, or existing in-migrant communities (Odagiri 2017). The potential for *akiya* reuse is thus closely related to the town's ability to attract and support newcomers who are willing to navigate the complex hurdles of obtaining an *akiya* and investing time, energy, and money into renovating them.

Parallel to these individual cases, a growing number of start-ups and businesses focusing on the existing housing market have emerged since the 2000s. Companies such as Tokyo R Real Estate give new value to existing housing stock by renovating, renting, or reselling. Other companies like Renoberu provide renovation advice and services to prospective or existing owners including finding, designing, and renovating existing apartments and houses. While most of these companies are based in Tokyo or other metropolitan areas, where there is a sizable population that is starting to consider secondhand housing as an affordable alternative to new construction, similar initiatives have appeared in rural Japan. Notably, these groups, which include social enterprises, NPOs, universities, and community collectives, are shifting away from offering a professional service to more participatory, low-cost and community-oriented approaches. These models involve diverse actors—students, volunteers, young in-migrants, and residents—coming together to collaborate in the planning, renovation, and ongoing use of *akiya*. The next section introduces the town of Onomichi, Hiroshima Prefecture, a well-known case of a citizen-led *akiya* renovation movement that has inspired similar initiatives across Japan.

6.3 The vacant house renovation movement in Onomichi

6.3.1 NPO Onomichi Vacant House Renovation Project

Onomichi is a quaint town in Hiroshima Prefecture, built around a port established over 850 years ago. It is a historic city celebrated in literature and cinema, having been featured in Yasujiro Ozu's 1953 film *Tokyo Story*. In the late Meiji (1868–1912), Taisho (1912–1926), and early Showa (1926–1989) periods, wealthy merchants began to build villas and tea gardens, followed by Western-style buildings, inns, and common wooden row houses for veterans. These various styles form the unique present-day landscape, consisting of old buildings that have been spared from large-scale damage from war or natural disasters. Once an important hub of trade and exchange, the town thrived until the postwar period. Like many other regional cities, industrial restructuring, out-migration and population aging further contributed to socioeconomic decline. Numerous shops along the *shōtengai* (shopping street) have shut down, and the number of *akiya* have multiplied. It is estimated that over a quarter of the 2,000 or so houses around Onomichi Station and its sloped residential district sit empty (Asami 2017).

Many of the *akiya* cluster in the Yamate district, a hillside neighborhood accessible only by winding alleys and narrow steps built before the arrival of cars. During the postwar years of high economic growth and urbanization, the construction of the railway and new roads for cars along with tall concrete apartment blocks built in the downtown flat areas drew residents away. Yamate came to be seen as inconvenient, unsafe and unsuited to modern living. Current building regulations forbid any new construction in areas without adequate fire truck access, meaning houses can be renovated but not rebuilt. The difficult access means that renovation costs are around three times higher than in flat areas. The remaining residents in the area are mostly older adults, many of whom move away when it becomes too challenging for them to climb the steps. Once a house becomes too dilapidated and needs to be demolished, it cannot be rebuilt. This sense of crisis led to the formation of a local grassroots movement gathering like-minded individuals to do something about the situation.

A key figure in Onomichi's *akiya* renovation movement is Masako Toyota, founder of the NPO Onomichi Akiya Saisei Purojekuto (NPO Onomichi Vacant Housing Regeneration Project), widely known as Aki-P. Born in Onomichi. Toyota left for Osaka in her 20s where she worked as a tour guide for eight years. At the time, she said she couldn't wait to escape

her hometown and did not realize the value of Onomichi. While conducting tours across Europe, she came to change her perspective after encountering historic towns that treasured their old buildings and valued them. She saw many similarities, especially with Italian villages, such as those on the Amalfi coast, where old buildings reflected the local identity of each region. Seeing parallels with Onomichi's hillside districts, Toyota decided to return to Onomichi in her early 30s as a U-turners determined to save its unique townscape.

The Yamate district is made up of small winding alleys called *roji*, where neighbors still say hello to one another as they come and go about their daily life. Toyota spent six years walking around the hill area meeting the locals, including people from the neighborhood association (*chōnaikai*) to gather information on *akiya*. In 2007, she learned that an old wooden *akiya* was slated for demolition. Toyota bought it for 2 million yen and began renovating it with her carpenter husband, documenting each stage on a public blog. The house later became known as the Gaudi House (Figure 6.3). People from all over Japan started to notice her blog and became interested in the project. Over 100 people contacted her through her blog, inquiring about renovation and the availability of *akiya* in Onomichi. This interest led Toyota to think that if 100 people would move to Onomichi and fix an *akiya* each, then that would mean 100 *akiya* could potentially be saved. This led her to gather a group of friends and form a voluntary organization that later formally incorporated as an NPO in 2008: Aki-P.



Figure 6.3. Gaudi House. Photo by author, February 19, 2022.

One of the key barriers for newcomers to access *akiya* is the lack of information and know-how. Because houses in the Yamate district have low market value, real estate agents generally do not handle them. Although the city started an *akiya* bank in 1999, it resulted in few successful matches. Since Aki-P began managing the system on behalf of the town in 2009, the situation has improved: by 2023, Aki-P had helped connect over 150 new in-migrants to available *akiya*, with over half of them coming from outside Hiroshima Prefecture.

Toyota attributes this success due to several factors. Aki-P staff could work on the weekends to meet with interested in-migrants, whereas previously the town hall staff could only work on weekday office hours. Even with the *akiya* bank in operation, the reality is that there is often more success if interested newcomers visit the town and experience life in Onomichi themselves to get up-to-date information from personal networks and word of mouth. This is why there is only a phone number listed on Aki-P's website—those interested speak to Toyota personally, who then encourages them to visit and meet them face-to-face to build a direct relationship.

As someone who experienced the challenges of renovation herself, Toyota knew it was crucial to not only support newcomers in finding *akiya* but also on how to renovate them. Aki-P organizes renovation workshops for amateurs to learn techniques from craftspeople, introduces newcomers to local tradespeople, and runs a warehouse stocked with salvaged materials such as windows and door frames, and second-hand furniture, encouraging reuse and circular practices.

One of the first projects Aki-P worked on was a small two-story house called Kitamura Shoten (Figure 6.4). The modest structure was abandoned for around 20 years resulting in a leaky roof, extensive termite damage, and rotting beams. With limited funds, Aki-P hosted 10 workshops attracting over 100 volunteers. Toyota explains how this process of collective renovation became the model adopted for their future projects. Firstly, professionals are called upon to do various specialist construction works (*senmonka no kōji*), such as structural upgrades and connecting water and electricity. Then the public workshops are held to tackle more simple but laborious tasks in a DIY style for everyone to learn skills and techniques from various craftspeople, plasterers, carpenters and so on. For Kitamura Shoten, an artist was invited to complete parts of the interior before it opened in early 2009. It is now used as an informal gathering space aimed at mothers with children and Aki-P's office

on top, where staff often meet potential in-migrants to share information related to *akiya* and migration.



Figure 6.4. Kitamura Shoten. Photo by author, November 10, 2022.

Since then, Aki-P has renovated around 20 properties, transforming them into guesthouses, cafés, artist-in-residence spaces, rental units, share houses, and informal gathering spots. The projects are used not only by tourists but also by long-term residents and new in-migrants. In a small city where job opportunities are limited, such spaces create environments where newcomers can build networks, find collaborators, and connect with existing residents in Onomichi, including gaining an insight into previous experiences of in-migrants who have successfully started their own business. Aki-P’s cafés and guesthouses also regularly employ new in-migrants giving them a foot in the door. In a small town, the challenge of finding a job is the next hurdle for many newcomers once they secure accommodation.

Aki-P describes its mission as generating new value by combining *akiya* with other functions. Their activities span five “pillars”—architecture, environment, community, tourism, and art—reflecting its interdisciplinary and place-based approach. Documentation and dissemination are also central to their strategy to promote their efforts in the form of well-designed flyers, maps, posters, and merchandise. The group also regularly updates its Facebook and Instagram. This media savviness has been identified as a crucial aspect of area renovation—Baba et al. (2016, 27) identifies four key “characters” that enable renovation to successfully happen:

1. A real estate character (someone who coordinates)
2. A design/architecture character (someone who designs and makes the space)
3. A graphic character (someone who presents the activities attractively), and
4. A media character (someone who can effectively communicate information).

Aki-P integrates all four roles into its operations. Now nearly 20 years on, Toyota continues to be deeply involved in Aki-P. She regularly hosts *akiya* consultation session in person (*akiya sōdan kai*), conducts tours, and agrees to as many media interviews she can, especially from local newspapers which have a big influence on getting locals especially the older residents to understand the work she and Aki-P do. In early 2023, she guided a group of architecture students from Harvard Graduate School of Design, and in early 2024 she led my University of Melbourne students through several recent projects. These included the now-finished Gaudi House available to be rented out as private accommodation, and a three-story corner building that was a former medical clinic now turned into a bookstore, pop-up retail area, and accommodation.

Toyota emphasizes the aim of renovation *akiya* is not only to save buildings but to support people in building sustainable lives in Onomichi. She tries to do her bit by spending 1,000 yen a day at small local businesses run by in-migrants (recalling the friend economy) concept. For her, revitalization is inseparable from supporting the people who choose to settle in the city and enabling them to remain in Onomichi with a sense of pride.

6.3.2 The Onomichi Labyrinth House

Unlike Toyota, who returned to Onomichi as a U-turner, my next interlocutor, Yu, was originally from Tokyo and moved to Onomichi in his mid-30s as an I-turner. Yu studied architecture at university and later lived in Germany for nearly 10 years, where he researched and experienced with the reuse of vacant space there. He first learned about Onomichi and the work of Aki-P during a visit in 2015, subsequently forming friendships with like-minded residents in the town. In 2018, one of these friends helped him find a vacant house in the old Yamate district by posting letters inquiring about unused *akiya*. They received a reply from an owner who was happy to give away their *akiya* for free—Yu only needed to pay the legal fees transfer ownership. Yu decided to take up the offer and moved to Onomichi soon after. He explains:

I received this house for free after posting letters in the area asking if anyone had a vacant house they didn't want anymore. It had been left empty for about 15 years. I am now living in the house while renovating it with the help of friends, friends of friends, and strangers who have become friends.

The house was originally built in the 1930s and had been lying vacant for over 15 years (Figure 6.5). I met Yu in early 2021 at the beginning of my fieldwork. An I-turner I befriended recently mentioned she was volunteering on an *akiya* renovation project and invited me to join. Curious to see the project, I agreed and soon began volunteering on a nearly monthly basis for the next year. On my first visit, I knew I was at the right place after seeing two people squatting outside the entrance removing nails from long bits of timber. After introducing myself to Yu, I was told to join them. It turned out that picking out nails was a job for new people like me, as it did not require any advanced skills. We chatted as we worked on a large pile of salvaged timber window and door frames that were being prepared for reuse. The time went by fast, and the work was not as tedious as I had imagined, largely due to the company of new friends and the informal environment.



Figure 6.5. The entrance to Onomichi Labyrinth House on the day of the flea market and open house tour. Photo by author, April 3, 2021.

I continued to visit the house over the next few months and learned the story of how the project came to be. Yu recalled how he went to check out the house after receiving the keys discovering it was still full of belongings—furniture, clothing, and other objects—so densely packed that it was difficult to walk around. The belongings were later sorted and some sold in flea markets or left out on the streets for others to freely take (Figure 6.6). During this process, it turned out that there were three interconnected buildings: a main house at the front, a storehouse, and an annex (Figure 6.7). Its winding rooms resembled a labyrinth, which led to the project being nicknamed the Onomichi Labyrinth House.



Figure 6.6. Belongings from the house, which have been sorted and left out for people to take for free. Photo by author, March 13, 2022.

Realizing he could not tackle the project alone, Yu asked two friends to help. The three of them began clearing the house, and soon a broader group gradually formed. Initially, it was just friends of friends coming to help and others from the community who knew about the project through word of mouth. A dedicated website, Facebook page, and Instagram account were later made, drawing in additional volunteers, including those who traveled there from outside Onomichi to participate.

第一期改修工事

The 1st construction phase.

2020/11/21 - 11/28

家具・畳・建具運び出し

台所周辺解体

一階六畳間床・天井解体

二階三畳間解体

資材搬入

一階六畳間柱・梁補強

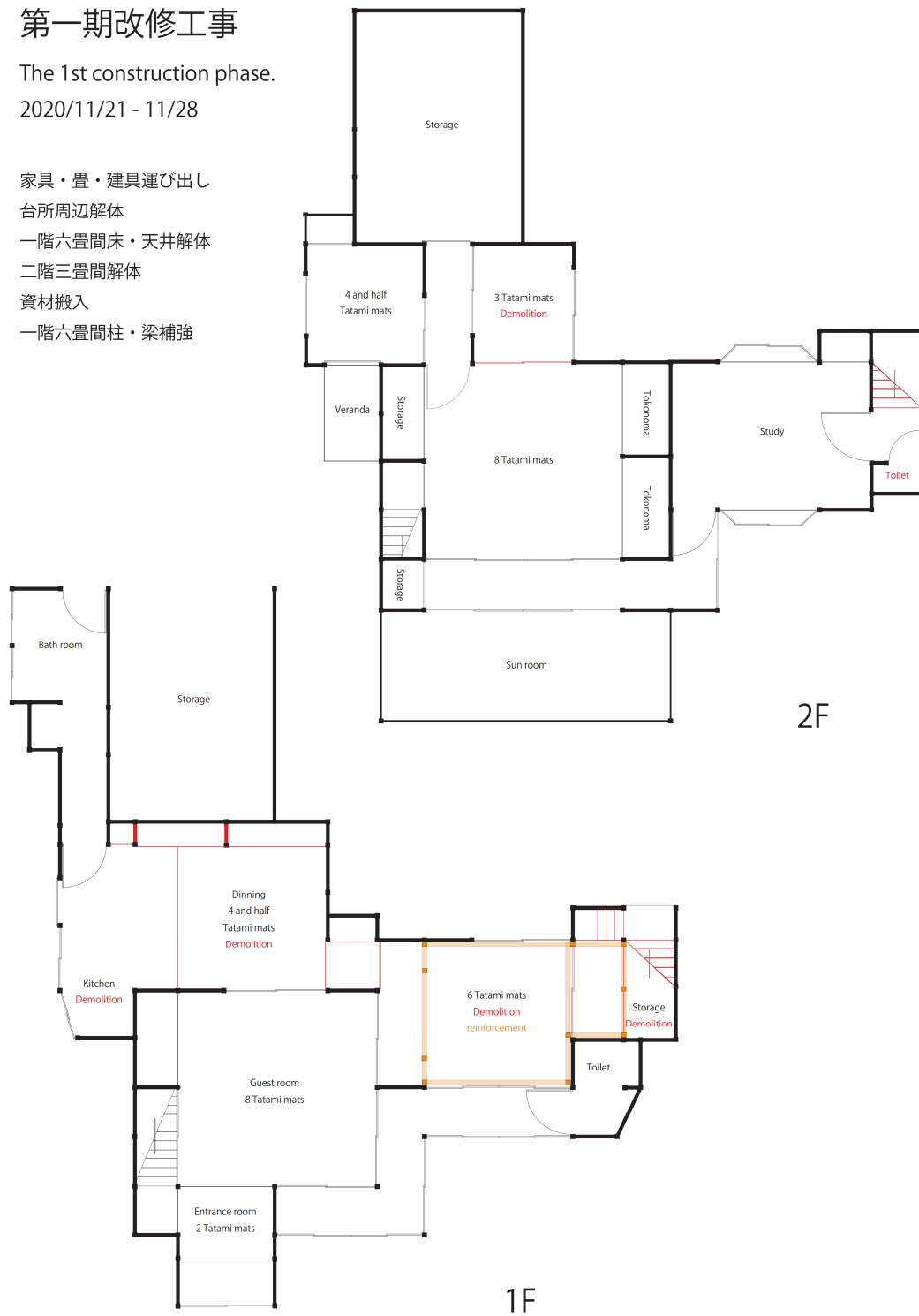


Figure 6.7. Plan drawing showing the first phase of construction, 2021. Courtesy of Yu.

Renovation was carried out through monthly workshops that lasted around a week each time. Each workshop brought together a different web of participants, though a small core group attended consistently. After getting to know the members, I learned that everyone came from diverse backgrounds, including office workers, freelancers, jewelry makers, café owners, translators, students, artists, part-time workers, and travelers. Some joined to learn DIY skills while others simply enjoy the social interactions that developed around the renovation process. A Facebook Messenger group chat served as the main communication channel, where members shared updates and collectively debated design decisions such as paint colors or tile patterns. One time when I was volunteering, I was tasked with reusing the salvaged wooden tiles from Yu's family home in Tokyo for the new entrance way. Some pieces had a black triangle on them but had arrived in jumbled sections that I needed to piece back together like a puzzle. No longer limited to the old pattern, I used the chat to ask for votes on which floor-tile arrangement everyone liked best (Figure 6.8). Unlike the usual architect–client model, design decisions were made collaboratively through the Messenger group, where members could discuss and compare their preferred designs. Participation also extended beyond construction. One member, for instance, rarely did DIY work but enjoyed cooking and became the lead cook for workshop meals.

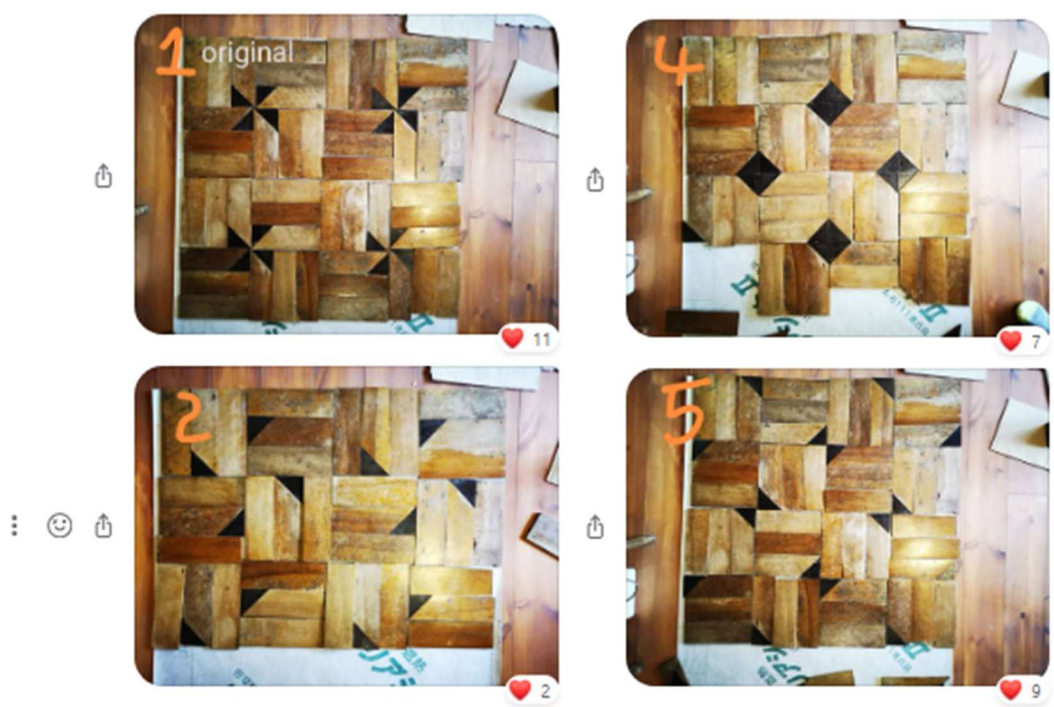


Figure 6.8. Screen shots of Facebook messenger chat where members voted for the pattern to lay wooden tiles at the entrance.

Yu, as the initiator and eventual resident, usually provided accommodation and meals for participants during the building workshops. In exchange, volunteers offered their time, assisting with tasks ranging from carpentry and plastering to shopping, cooking, transporting materials, and disposing of waste. As time no longer equates to money, time-consuming but more environmentally sustainable methods such as preparing salvaged materials by hand for reuse rather than purchasing new material from the home center became viable approaches. The pace of renovation was intentionally slow as there was no strict deadline, allowing balanced periods of work, rest, and social exchange. Building tasks were punctuated by tea breaks, shared meals, and evening gatherings allowing participants to connect and get to know each other. At the end of the day, everyone gathers for a dinner party where discussions on how to proceed with the renovations are carried out over tea or beer. It is through these conversations and communal moments that ideas for not only the design but also the future use of the project take shape as various participants offer fresh ideas, encouraging open dialogue and consensus-building.

Yu explains that one of his key goals for the project is driven by a shared motivation to treat vacant space as a form of commons rather than a private commodity. The property's legal ownership was placed under the names of six core members, partly to reduce the amount of tax on the property but also reflect the project's collaborative nature. Drawing on David Harvey's (2011) writings on the urban commons, Yu and another core member described their intention to create a universal and free space open to a range of different actors to participate. Yu had said before that the project is not about creating a business to make a profit and thus has no fixed program. The Labyrinth House is not formally a guesthouse, though people can stay; it is not a café, though people can use the kitchen to cook and host dinner parties. Those who have contributed to the renovation process feel entitled to use the space, and Yu welcomes them doing so, viewing their continued presence as essential to ensure the house is fully utilized. Thus, the house lives on and is preserved through continued use by multiple actors who have invested time, energy, and care, to co-produce both the house and the social world that sustains it.

As of 2023, the main house has been completed, and renovation is now focused on the back of the house, now led by another core member since Yu returned to full-time work. Plans are underway to transform the back building into a small general store to provide daily necessities to locals in the area. Renovation workshops are still being held throughout 2025

(Figure 6.9), as well as events and activities such as house tours and talk events that open the house to the wider community (Figure 6.10).

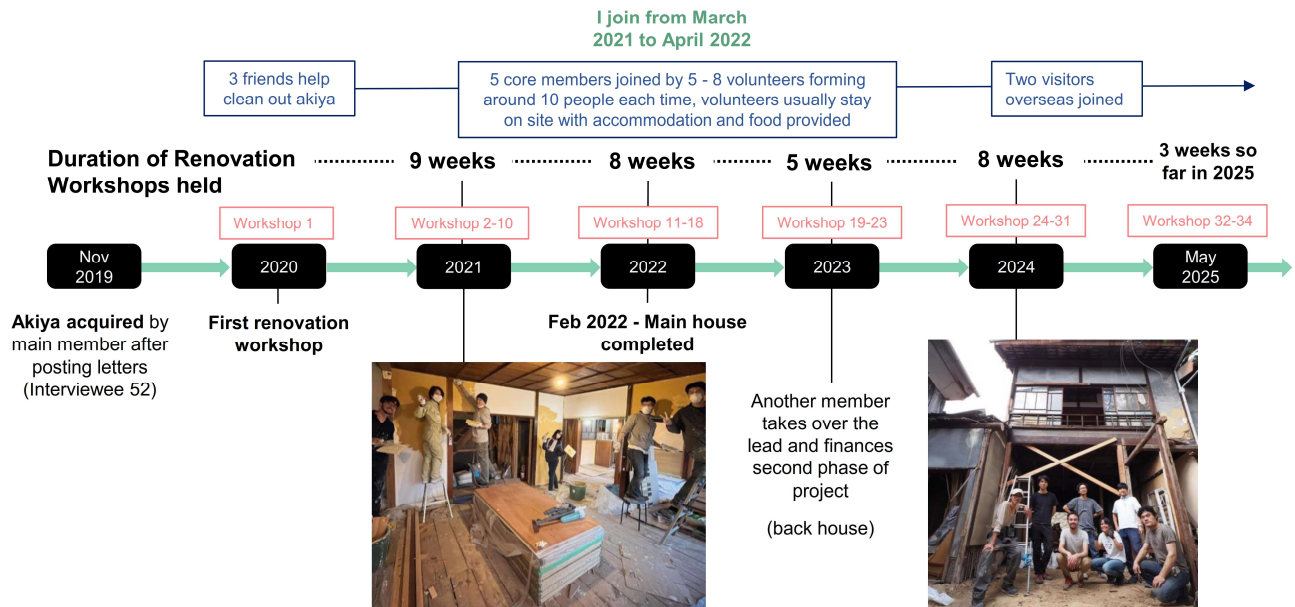


Figure 6.9. Timeline of renovation workshops from 2019 - 2025.

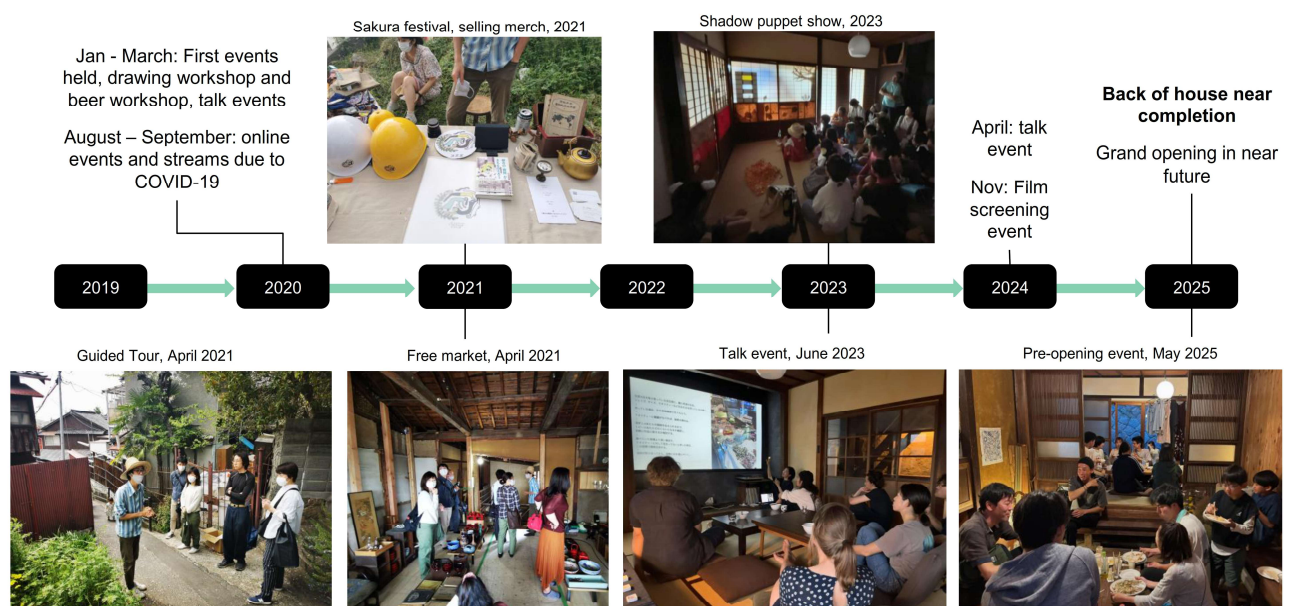


Figure 6.10. Timeline of events and activities from 2019 - 2025.

This DIY spirit adopted by Aki-P and the Labyrinth House is evident in other projects in Onomichi. Another example is a guesthouse near the shopping strip, created through self-renovation by a J-turner, Murata. I first met Murata when I stayed at his guesthouse in Onomichi, which is listed on Airbnb and popular with overseas guests. The rooms are affordable, and the lounge and café areas functions as a communal space frequented by both guests and locals. During my stay one night, a young in-migrant, who was living in Onomichi at the time, stepped in to help cook for the night and had dinner with the guests. The following year, I learned she had opened her own café nearby.

Murata is an active figure participating in local *machizukuri* activities and has been featured in various media interviews. Describing himself as a bit of a rebel in his youth, Murata questioned the definition of happiness taught to him as a child, echoing the alternative life paths sought by in-migrants I had interviewed. Like Sayuri's explanation of the ladder, which required one to attend a good school to then find a good job, Murata wished to pursue a more unconventional path. While working as a DJ in Berlin, he witnessed how ordinary venues like clubs and cafés could be transformed into vibrant social spaces. Upon returning to Japan, he considered living in Tokyo, but the rent was too high for him to stay long. Murata found he would spend his time and energy working just to make enough money to live paycheck to paycheck due to the high rent. Looking for somewhere more affordable, Murata arrived in Onomichi more than a decade ago and became part of the early wave of young in-migrants who have since played a central role in supporting others who move to the city.

6.4 Party Architecture and the 0-Yen House

One reason Murata found Onomichi appealing was the abundance of *akiya* that could be rented or used at a fraction compared to Tokyo prices. A few years after he moved to the city, Murata met a young traveler who had no place to stay, prompting the two to embark on a guesthouse project. The renovation of a two-story house down a narrow alley was carried out in a DIY manner, with the contributions from friends, locals, and travelers. A sign outside the building invited strangers to join the work, one of those who responded was a young man named Shotaro Miyahara. Shotaro, then in his 20s, soon became a central member of the amateur renovation team and the three of them finished the renovations in six months. Inspired by the experience, Shotaro went on to start a collective called Party Architecture and made a career out of it. The name captures his approach of renovating while hosting parties

and creating opportunities for casual, open participation. Instead of seeing construction as a specialized profession, Shotaro envisioned it as a collaborative act in which everyday people could co-create spaces.

Shotaro studied space design at a vocational college and was preparing for job hunting when he met Murata in Onomichi. Helping with the guesthouse renovation revealed to him the potential of involving friends and nonprofessionals in the building process. This was not the norm when working at a conventional architecture office, which is often dominated by desk work and consulting with other professionals on behalf of a client. Shotaro was inspired by the old days when villagers would help each other when they built houses and held festivals to celebrate the completion of a building, often regarded as a major social event for the community. Such events were an integral part of everyday life, where architecture and the process of building (and maintenance) were familiar and even fun. Example of communal building traditions include *yui*, in which villagers historically assisted each other with tasks like thatching roofs. Shotaro described his view of architecture as a kind of festival (*matsuri*), an opportunity to gather, create, and celebrate together. Party Architecture emerged from this vision of reinterpreting communal building culture for the present day.

The first few projects Shotaro worked on were introduced to him by friends and acquaintances. His team would travel around Japan working and living on building sites before moving on to the next one. The main difference between Shotaro's group and other design firms is that they do not strive for perfect construction work but adopt a low-tech DIY approach, sharing techniques with people who live in or use the property. In the early days, they did not charge money (Shotaro said that this was because no one was a licensed architect or professional carpenter) and instead renovated the property for free in exchange for staying on-site. People would bring food when they held parties to ensure that no one would go hungry. As there was usually a very low budget, instead of buying new materials Shotaro would often drive around looking for demolition sites or disposal facilities to salvage materials to use. By living on-site, Shotaro could design and build organically, adjusting plans on the spot and involving owners in the process. The motivation was not only social connection but also to help upskill and educate users of the place so they can maintain the house themselves after Shotaro and his team leave. In this way, knowledge, skills, and agency circulate and continue to empower users to shape their spaces over time.

I came to know Shotaro when his team was invited by a local artist, Daiki Murakami, to work on an *akiya* project on the island of Ikuchijima. Murakami is a U-turner in his early 40s who had relocated to the islands a decade earlier. The project, called the 0-Yen House (Figure 6.11), embodied the experimental ethos of both Party Architecture and artist Murakami. It was Murakami who developed the idea of creating a rent-free house that would allow young people to live without worrying about paying rent. To realize this concept, he secured a large *akiya* from an owner willing to let him use it freely including granting him full discretion on how it could be renovated.



Figure 6.11. The 0-Yen House. Photo by author, October 30, 2021.

The project was inspired by Murakami's own experience of living in *akiya* on the islands. After struggling with high rents in Tokyo, where he was paying 140,000 yen a month for a modest apartment, Murakami returned to his grandparent's island home, which had been empty for 10 years. He and his family moved into the house and soon found another nearby *akiya* to use as his painting studio, the owner allowed Murakami to use it for free and refused any offer of payment. A third house with a large garden is used to grow vegetables. Murakami and his family currently use all three properties rent-free. This situation is not uncommon with several other migrants living in such "0 yen rent houses," where owners were often grateful for someone to live in and maintain their property rather than leave it to deteriorate.

Reflecting on his own struggles as an artist in Tokyo and by the broader precarity experienced by young people as well as the COVID-19 pandemic, Murakami wished to create a comfortable and carefree community where there would be no anxiety about money allowing young people to live freely during a time of uncertainty. He writes an introduction on his blog:

The 0-yen house is a place where around five people can live together but it is different to a regular share house. The rent and bills are 0. This is a place where those in their 20s and 30s who are worried about their future can live for one year. During this one year, I hope young people can concentrate on what they enjoy and like doing.

Citing the rising cases of depression and mental health problems among Japanese youth, Murakami believes that financial-related stress can be reduced if young people do not need to worry about living costs. His only rule was that residents of the house limit the amount of time working at paid part-time jobs to two to three days a week to ensure they had time to rest and pursue their personal interests. Renovation costs were raised through a successful crowdfunding campaign where 120 people supported the project. Around 30 people applied to live in the 0-Yen House, mainly from people who had read Murakami's blog or seen the project through crowdfunding. Five people were eventually selected by Murakami and moved in after the renovations.

When I visited the 0-Yen House to volunteer for a few days to help with renovations, Shotaro's team was living on-site and had prepared a spare room for me where I slept with my sleeping bag. I noticed a simple hand sketch that Shotaro had made to show the proposed plan (Figure 6.12). There were no computer drawings. The traditional wooden frame of the house was structurally sound, allowing the renovation of nonstructural walls and sliding doors to create a larger, more flexible dining and gallery space in place of several small rooms. Other new functions included a small bookstore, a fireplace, and a composting bio-toilet. Many design details are left open and decided on the go, for example, the idea to add bunk beds in the former closet space was made spontaneously during construction.

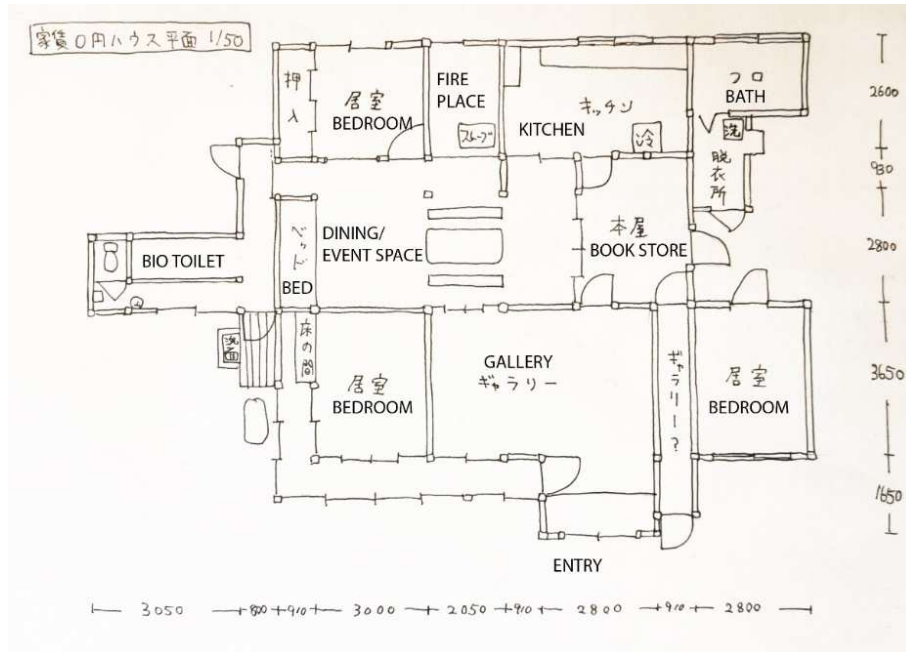


Figure 6.12. Hand-drawn plan of 0-Yen House, 2021. Courtesy of Shotaro.

As with other Party Architecture projects, salvaged materials feature throughout the house and are reused where possible. Old wooden planks were cleaned and reused for joinery and flooring (Figure 6.13). Other times, demolished material onsite were appropriated in an improvised way, such as a lamp shade Shotaro constructed out of the bamboo lattice structure inside the old earthen walls (Figure 6.14). Bedding and appliances like refrigerators and washing machines were all donated by local supporters and residents.

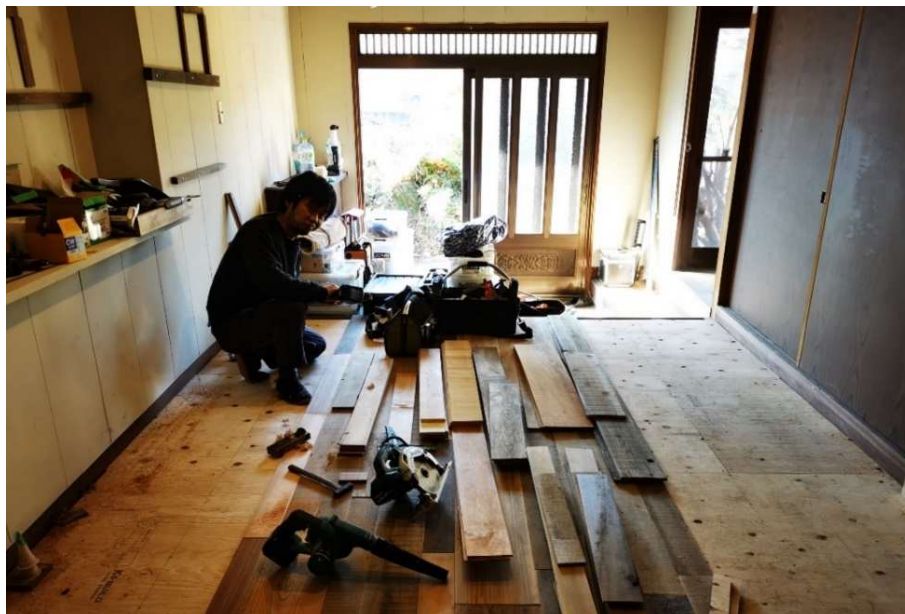


Figure 6.13. Salvaged wooden boards reused as flooring material. Photo by author, October 5, 2021.



Figure 6.14. Salvaged bamboo lattice from demolished walls repurposed into lamp shade. Photo by author, December 15, 2021.

Projects like the 0-Yen House depended on the availability of free *akiya* to allow such experimental projects to be realized and tested. Like the Onomichi Labyrinth House, various social gatherings and events were held both during and after the renovations, turning the share house into a lively community hub (Figure 6.15).



Figure 6.15. Performance at 0-Yen House featuring live cooking, dancing, music and painting gathering in-migrants, locals and visitors. Photo by author, October 30, 2021.

Back in Onomichi, manga artist Kentaro Tsuru similarly described how he was able to “escape Tokyo” (*Tōkyō dasshutsu*) after obtaining an *akiya* for 0 yen. His manga, *0-yen de akiya o moratte Tōkyō dasshutsu!* (*Receive an Akiya for 0 Yen and Escape Tokyo!*), depicts how the availability of *akiya* was a ticket out of Tokyo and essentially a pathway out of precarity for young people.

In the manga, Tsuru describes how he felt unhappy living in Tokyo as he had started to feel anxious about his life in the city (*moya moya shiteiru*). After moving to Tokyo in his early 20s, he had spent the next eight years dedicated to his art while working part-time jobs to support himself. His part-time job at a local bookstore barely made 2 million yen a year. Tsuru described himself as living a poor person’s life (*binbō raifu*) in Tokyo sometimes struggling to pay rent. A friend who was living in Onomichi at the time told him that family-sized stand-alone *akiya* were available for rent for around 10,000 to 20,000 yen a month, some even with sea views. Tsuru went to visit Onomichi and found one he liked, and after successfully contacting the owner, was offered the *akiya* for free (transfer and registration fees cost him around 200,000 yen).

Tsuru decided to move to Onomichi with his partner after acquiring the *akiya* for 0-yen. He was 30 at the time. This was back in 2008 when Toyota had just formed Aki-P. Tsuru became a member of Aki-P and, in addition to working on his own house, led the design and DIY renovation of a café and guesthouse project called “Anago no nedoko.” The renovation work was done mainly by Tsuru and other Aki-P members with salvaged materials rescued from an old elementary school that was about to be demolished. After nine months of renovation, the guesthouse opened in 2012. It is now a popular place for visitors, offering an affordable place to stay while also serving as a source of employment for Tsuru and other part-time staff.

Tsuru still runs the guesthouse today in addition to his freelance work as an artist. Reflecting on his move, he had viewed Onomichi as a typical town that was not particularly special, but the combination of chance encounters, supportive people, and the unexpected opportunity to acquire an *akiya* at the right moment made his relocation feasible. Tsuru claims he can live a comfortable life in Onomichi for less than 2 million yen, which was impossible back in Tokyo.

Taken together, these stories illustrate how *akiya* are becoming catalysts for new forms of living, working, and imagining the countryside. They also reveal how practices of DIY renovation, resourcefulness, and communal labor shape the everyday experiences of those who choose to relocate. The projects by Aki-P, the 0-Yen House, and Party Architecture are not isolated cases; they represent a wider shift in values among the younger generation seeking autonomy, affordability, and purpose outside major cities. It is within this shifting landscape that the broader implications of *akiya* reuse come into focus. The following summary draws these threads together to show how the rise of DIY renovation, alternative economies, and postgrowth sensibilities are transforming both the material and social fabric of places like Onomichi and the surrounding islands.

6.5 Chapter summary

This chapter has shown how *akiya*, long framed as symbols of decline, are now becoming crucial sites for young in-migrants and the broader *kankei jinkō* to experiment with new ways of living through renovation and creative reuse. Rather than treating *akiya* as burdens, they reinterpret them as opportunities to build meaningful lives outside the constraints of a growth-oriented, market-driven system. By challenging the dominant scrap-and-build mentality born out of the high-growth years, these practices embrace more humble, small-scale architecture, pieced together with what is at hand. This new direction sees value in investing in *akiya* against the logic of the market. In conventional urban real estate markets, renovation is pursued to increase property value. But for many young in-migrants in rural Japan, value is not measured through capital—they do not expect resale gains and often do not own the houses they renovate. Instead, what matters is the possibility of shaping environments that support everyday life by creating places where people can gather, collaborate, and belong.

A central shift illustrated through the case studies is the rise of collective DIY renovation culture. Groups like the NPO Aki-P gather like-minded people who share tools, knowledge, and labor to support one another in *akiya* reuse. Others like the Onomichi Labyrinth House are formed through a loose group of friends and volunteers. Party Architecture likewise began by not charging any fees, relying instead on the care and support of local residents who ensured the team would not go hungry. These collaborative practices produce an alternative economy rooted in social relations rather than financial transactions.

Renovation becomes a process of placemaking: a slow, participatory, and relational act that empowers people to take ownership of their environments.

In places like Onomichi, the hillside district left behind by capitalism has allowed new forms of expression and experimentation where form no longer follows finance. It is precisely because the area has been neglected that has allowed new possibilities to emerge. The incremental process of DIY renovation allows participants to collaborate on small-scale improvements that adapt to the changing needs of a locality over time. This “refashioning of space” is driven by the goal of transforming rural places into attractive destinations and living environments (Yamagishi and Doering 2025). Open workshop formats provide a democratic and inclusive space for people from diverse backgrounds to contribute according to their interests and skills. Through these cumulative acts of repair, the countryside is gradually being reshaped by newcomers who perceive value in alternative, postgrowth-oriented economies.

Building on recent scholarship that approaches migrants as active city-makers and placemakers (Çaglar and Glick Schiller 2018; Zhao 2023), I conceptualize rural in-migrants as placemakers in the countryside who expand our understanding of the “social turn” in architecture while advancing a “spatial turn” in studies of community, belonging, and social practice. *Akiya* renovation offers a tangible example of what postgrowth architecture could be, illustrating how degrowth principles such as repair, reuse, sufficiency, and collective stewardship, can shape not only buildings but also new forms of rurality (Varvarousis et al. 2024). The projects demonstrate how the social and spatial transformations taking place in rural Japan can serve as models for rethinking architectural production in ways that prioritize relationships, participation, and ecological consciousness.

Crucially, the placemaking practices emerging from *akiya* reuse do not remain confined to local actors. As the following chapter will show, these experiments in living, building, and collaborating are increasingly being shared with broader audiences, including domestic visitors, students, urban professionals, and overseas participants, who can all have a role to play in remaking the countryside.

Chapter 7: Learning from the countryside

This chapter explores the potential of rural areas as places of learning, exchange, and cross-cultural collaboration through design education. One group identified as promising cases of *kankei jinkō* are university students and their faculty members from diverse disciplines such as tourism studies, sociology, and architecture. Students from Japanese universities regularly visit rural areas to conduct fieldwork and site-based research (Hayashi 2019; Horiuchi and Morishige 2024; Sakai and Ochi 2020). Scholars have noted multiple benefits from such interactions, including increased civic pride, deeper understanding of the challenges faced by rural areas, and more sustained interest in rural revitalization, regardless of whether the student migrates to the area or not (Horiuchi 2023). Unlike in-migrants or those who have dual residences, students are not necessarily motivated to seek an alternative way of life or escape the cities (at least not yet) but wish to learn and contribute to rural communities through research and collaborative activities. In this sense, students can play an important role in bridging urban and rural areas and foster mutual learning and exchanges.

While there are examples of Japanese universities conducting fieldwork and contributing to rural revitalization, less attention has been paid to how overseas universities and foreign students might participate and contribute to rural communities as a part of the broader *kankei jinkō*. In parallel to undertaking fieldwork for this thesis, I continued my teaching role at the University of Melbourne and remotely conducted a Master of Architecture design studio. Due to the pandemic, I was able to teach students online while physically based in Japan from 2021 to 2022. This led to the development series of studios called Japan Studio, where the island communities I studied became the sites of inquiry for my students, who were tasked to conduct online field research and develop design proposals for the island region.

Japan Studio explores how placemaking practices can be expanded to include those from outside the region, in this case, students from an Australian university. In Japan, citizen participation has long been recognized as a key component of placemaking and a crucial factor in sustaining peripheral areas by strengthening place identity (Capitanio 2018). The chapter first introduces examples of university activities that focus on rural Japan involving foreign students before discussing Japan Studio. Through these examples, I argue that rural Japan can serve as a productive setting for design education, enabling students to contribute

to the placemaking of rural areas even without being physically present or permanently relocating.

7.1 Students in rural Japan

7.1.1 The Tane Project by MIT and Keio University

As a doctoral student at Keio University, I am a member of Kobayashi Lab (KobLab), led by my supervisor Professor Hiroto Kobayashi. One of the lab's long-running projects is based in a small mountain village called Tane in Nagahama City, Shiga Prefecture. Both undergraduate and graduate students visit Tane for fieldwork, undertake building-related workshops, and initiate community-oriented activities. Since 2007, Tane has hosted a collaborative project between the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) and Keio University. Run under the MIT Japan Design Workshop under Shun Kanda and Kobayashi Lab, the two universities conducted joint field research sessions aimed at “developing models for alternative futures guided by improved management of the surrounding ecology, a revived resident population and the introduction of an educational center for environmental design” (Tané Initiative 2011). MIT also ran a series of summer retreats where students and alumni spent the summer living in the village learning from locals to better understand the realities of depopulation.

Keio students, who visited more regularly, started to slowly renovate an old *akiya* into a livable base for students to stay in during fieldwork (Figure 7.1). Senior students would mentor the younger ones and visit Tane as a group, returning year after year to continue renovation. In some cases, students repeatedly visited for over five years, choosing Tane as the site for their master's theses. Each time, a new skill or technique would be explored to renovate and improve the house, often involving local craftspeople and local students. Local elders supported the students by helping with logistics, preparing food for events, or simply spending time together.



Figure 7.1. The *akiya* given to KobLab students to renovate and use as a base to stay in Tane. Photo by author, May 5, 2019.

In 2019, early in my doctoral studies, I joined a three-day trip to Tane with students from KobLab. Taking our sleeping bags, we stayed in the partially renovated house, cooked meals together, learned how to plant rice with our hands from the villagers, and completed a plastering workshop with a local craftsman and high school students. Everyone learned the technique from the plasterer and replastered the walls in one day (Figure 7.2). Outside of planned activities, students were invited into the homes of residents, listened to their stories, and learned firsthand about their lives and experiences of living in Tane. Though only a few short days, the experiences in Tane were an immersive experience involving being with people, observing, talking, and doing. Such encounters allowed students to develop personal relationships and gain an understanding of the deeper challenges faced by rural communities which are often overlooked by tourists.



Figure 7.2. Second floor of the *akiya* renovated by students over the years showing newly plastered walls. Photo by author, May 3, 2019.

As such, students are increasingly recognized as key contributors to the *kankei jinkō* through their sustained involvement (Sakai and Ochi 2020). Yet, one of the key challenges for such programs is that they largely depend on the initiative of active students and professors to lead the activities. Other struggles include securing ongoing funding to continue activities every year, navigating local expectations, and managing the dynamics of working with residents who may grow overly dependent on students.

7.1.2 The Koshirakura Landscape Workshop

Several overseas institutions have also taken rural Japan as a key site for investigation and experimentation. One of the longest-running examples is the Koshirakura Landscape Workshop run by the Architectural Association School of Architecture (AA) in London. Led by architect Shin Egashira, the workshop forms part of the AA's visiting school program, where both AA students and other students from around the world can apply to take part. Located in a remote village named Koshirakura in Niigata Prefecture, some 200 kilometers north of Tokyo, the workshop began in 1996 in collaboration with the local government. Egashira had been approached to assist with the revitalization of the village after its elementary school had closed due to the lack of children. Earlier proposals before Egashira were unrealized including one that proposed for the school to be turned into a tourist resort,

and another to attract businesses to the region, which also failed (Leen 2018). Egashira's idea of a student workshop received support and was successful in securing funding. The workshop has since become an annual summer event that "encourages a small group of architecture students to respond to the setting by creating projects that read, represent and spatially reconfigure the landscape into new constructions (Egashira 2008, 87)."

Students stay in the village for around three weeks using the vacant elementary school as their base and lodging. They work on a variety of creative projects ranging from small design-build structures to mapping, filmmaking, and landscape interventions. In the 12 years from 1996 to 2008, 16 built projects were completed, including a bus shelter, pizza oven, and outdoor cinema. The international cohort of students assisted residents in community activities and became temporary residents themselves: "Intercultural exchange plays an important part in the workshop as participants are accepted as residents of the village, having in turn to accept the duties that come with this" (Egashira 2015, 60). One example is the traditional Maple Cutting Festival (*momijihiki*) where student participation has strengthened not only their connection to the village but also reinforced the cultural significance of these traditions (Verderber 2019).

The workshop exemplifies slow placemaking through small and incremental efforts that build up over time, in this case nearly thirty years. As Egashira (2015, 63) notes, the goal was never to solve the depopulation problem, "the village does not need new buildings—it needs residents." However, like the *momijihiki* festival that has been maintained for generations, the workshop still attracts students who "continue to build, modify, remake and rebuild, seeing the making of architecture as a continuous event; one that might not change the economic forces, but that accepts them and uses them precisely because they provide creative freedom not possible in other educational or professional contexts" (Egashira 2015, 63). Such a view accepts the realities of depopulation and tries not to reverse it but uses the conditions of rural Japan as a space for creativity, experimentation, and cross-cultural exchange. From a practical point of view, the small structures made by the students improve the everyday lives of residents and symbolize the collective efforts of the village and international participants.

7.1.3 The Red Dot School in Sagishima

Egashira published a book on the Koshirakura workshops titled *Before, After Image Koshirakura Landscape 1996–2006* (2006). Inspired by Egashira's work, the Red Dot School is an independent international architecture school that holds similar design-build workshops on Sagishima, a small island facing severe depopulation. Founded in 2017 by architects Bryan Ortega-Welch, Nao Kono, Momoko Kono, and Sagishima resident Yoshishige (Isso) Kawamoto, the school invites students from around the world to participate. In 1955, the population had been over 3,600 but now only around 600 residents remain (The Red Dot School 2024). The directors are motivated to revitalize Sagishima through design education, focusing on the deconstruction and reuse of several vacant structures on the island.

A vacant school gym is used as a workshop space where students learn carpentry and other construction skills such as learning how to repurpose old timber from vacant houses (Figure 7.3). In one of the recent workshops, an old wooden structure was carefully dismantled, and its columns and beams were salvaged for reuse. The school hopes to work with locals on the island and dismantle more structures in a similar way to reclaim materials for reuse that would otherwise be wastefully demolished or simply left to fall apart. The focus on adaptive reuse and resourceful approaches to design and architecture highlights the potential for rural areas to become valuable testing grounds where students can learn hands-on skills to contribute in a tangible way.



Figure 7.3. Using a vacant school gym on Sagishima as a workshop space to learn traditional carpentry, hosted by the Red Dot School. Photo by author, Jan 17, 2024.

The above examples demonstrate how design students can participate meaningfully in rural placemaking through immersive, context-sensitive forms of design education. Building on these examples, Japan Studio explores how students from an overseas university can engage with rural communities through both online and offline means. The following sections discuss the activities and outcomes of Japan Studio at the University of Melbourne. Starting with virtual exchange and teaching online, the studio guides students to research the island communities and provide ideas for their future. The studio aims to not only broaden conceptions of the *kankei jinkō* to include international students but also strengthen placemaking and *machizukuri* practices by encouraging input from visitors and residents.

7.2 Japan Studio at the University of Melbourne

The Japan Studio offered at the University of Melbourne is a core Master of Architecture design studio. The design studio is considered a core component in the curriculum of architecture schools worldwide. It is often a required course every semester where students work individually or in a group to address an actual or hypothetical architectural problem through the development of a design proposal (Schreiber 2010). Creativity and social responsibility are emphasized in the teaching of architectural design to create meaningful environments (Salama 1995). Japan Studio started during the pandemic as a fully online course, enabling me to teach remotely while undertaking in-person fieldwork on the islands. The initial iterations of the studio explore how design education can facilitate engagement with rural communities through virtual exchange.

Previous examples of design studios from architecture programs outside of Japan have also chosen islands in the Seto Inland Sea as their project sites. Students from the Politecnico di Milano, for example, worked on Inujima with guidance from Kazuo Sejima (2015–2019), while students from the Harvard Graduate School of Design conducted studios on Omishima with Toyo Ito (2015–2017), both prominent architects. In Inujima, one of the islands participating in the international art festival Setouchi Triennale, the studio focused on the theme of architecture and the environment. In the Omishima studio, the course centered on reimagining the future of the island to make it attractive and livable through small interventions aimed to transform the shopping strip and reviving abandoned citrus farms. Ito's own continued involvement in Omishima through the Toyo Ito Museum of Architecture and a small winery illustrates how architectural education and rural revitalization can intersect in long-term ways.

Not far away from Omishima, the islands in Kamijima (primarily the islands of Yuge, Sashima, Ikina and Iwagi) were adopted as the field site for students from the University of Melbourne. During the early weeks of my fieldwork on Kamijima, conversations with town hall (*yakuba*) staff revealed that the municipality was considering building a new facility to promote tourism and migration. The potential project would be a Michi-no-Eki (roadside station), which is a typology found throughout Japan. The Michi-no-Eki became the project for Japan Studio in Semester 1, 2021.

To introduce the studio to prospective students, the following description was published on the university website:

Studio Description:

Studio Japan 2021 is the second edition of studios studying Japanese architecture and design at the Melbourne School of Design. We will look to the countryside as a source of inspiration and potential while responding to pressing contemporary issues. Japan is one of the first countries to enter a postgrowth era with an aging and decreasing population that has prompted many revitalization efforts in recent years including many by artists and architects. The effects of social and economic decline are most visible in rural areas including the proposed site located in Kamijima, a collection of remote islands in the Seto Inland Sea accessible only by boat. The studio examines this rural landscape between land and sea from a physical and social perspective to interrogate the role of architecture in community revitalization, identity, and creative placemaking.

Studio Outcomes:

Students will design a series of interventions at various scales culminating in an architectural project that responds to environmental, social, and cultural contexts with the goal of facilitating meaningful exchange between residents and an increasing number of visitors and tourists. How can architecture strengthen social ties and ultimately revitalize a community? Learning outcomes include a deeper understanding of both traditional and contemporary Japanese architecture and design concepts as a basis to draw on local knowledge, craft and the vernacular. Students will also develop their ability to synthesize a complex web of ideas, drawing on site,

culture, tradition, function, and climate to create a considered, socially engaged architectural response for the contemporary rural landscape.

Over 12 weeks, students met online via Zoom for six hours per week for discussions, reviews, and one-on-one consultations. Due to travel restrictions, students conducted research entirely remotely. This kind of virtual remote ethnography proved effective as students diligently gathered information from government websites, demographic data, historical records, blogs by in-migrants, policy documents, tourism pamphlets, and Instagram posts. Their research covered the island's geography, demographics, history, cultural heritage, local industries and everyday life. Each student compiled a visual journal collating the research and then selected a particular industry to analyze further and rethink its future potential. Examples of local industries selected include citrus farming, salt-making, seaweed farming, and fishing, and stone quarrying. To assist with the research, some residents, including in-migrants, were invited to join some classes to share their knowledge. This hybridized research was then translated into visual form through mapping, diagrams, and other analytical drawing before developing individual concept designs for the Michi-no-Eki.

To explore ways to engage with the community, the work from the studio was presented back to residents as a way of contributing ideas for both the Michi-no-Eki project and town's future in general. Student projects were exhibited at two public facilities across Kamijima, where visitors were encouraged to view the work and respond in some way. It was hoped that by encouraging the public to be involved, the studio could spark the start of a *machizukuri* process centered on citizen participation. One of the challenges of bottom-up placemaking approaches like *machizukuri* is finding people who are willing to lead such initiatives or there may be a lack of skills from citizens who are unable to make proposals without outside help (Watanabe 2006). In this case, collaboration with university students offered a way to visualize possibilities, generate dialogue, and strengthen local capacity.

In collaboration with town hall staff, a written questionnaire was prepared so that exhibition visitors could freely share their opinions. The compiled responses, included in the appendix of this thesis, were later delivered to the town hall as part of a report to assist in planning the project's next stages.

7.3 Exhibition and questionnaire results

After the design studio ended, student work was printed and displayed in two venues: The Umi-no-Eki community facility on Yuge island (Figure 7.4), and the ferry terminal at the port on Ikina island. Visitors to the exhibition were invited to complete a written questionnaire that asked them to comment on the exhibition, freely express their thoughts about the Michi-no-Eki project, indicate what facilities they would like to see more of on their island, and describe their understanding of what *machizukuri* was. The exhibition and questionnaire were developed in collaboration with a local town hall staff working as a COKT officer, who assisted with the exhibition set-up and translation of questionnaires. The town mayor also supported the initiative, telling me that the likelihood for the Michi-no-Eki project to succeed and go ahead would largely depend on resident support. In addition to showing the students' work, the exhibition was designed to encourage public participation and gather local opinions. In this way, the exhibition space became a platform where residents and visitors could meet, view the student work, and discuss their views with me and each other. Details of the two exhibitions are as follows:

Exhibition #1: July 19, 2021 – August 2, 2021, at a community facility, Umi-no-Eki (54 respondents)

Exhibition #2: Dec 18, 2021 – Jan 7, 2022, at Ikina port terminal (15 respondents)

A total of 69 people completed the two-page questionnaire at the end of the two exhibitions. Respondents ranged from children aged below 12 to adults aged 70 or above: 38 out of 69 respondents were current residents of the town, out of whom 23 were in-migrants (many were my interlocutors and acquaintances made during fieldwork); 16 were visitors or tourists, reflecting the fact that the exhibitions were held in spaces also frequented by non-residents.



Figure 7.4. The first exhibition of the Michi-no-Eki project, held at a public community facility on Yuge island. Photo by author, July 24, 2021.

7.3.1 What do residents think about a Michi-no-Eki?

When asked if they thought it would be a good idea for the town to build a Michi-no-Eki, 55 out of 65 responded “yes” (85%), five respondents answered “no” and another five were unsure. This suggests a high level of general support for the idea of building a new Michi-no-Eki facility on the islands.

When asked about the specific services and amenities they would like to see in the new Michi-no-Eki (multiple votes were allowed), the top responses were: cafes (46 votes), a place to rest outdoors (33 votes), souvenir shop (27 votes), a seafood market (24 votes), kids’ room (21 votes), bakery (20 votes), art gallery (17 votes), bars (16 votes), and migration support consultation services (14 votes). This clearly shows the desire for certain community amenities over others, which can help the town focus on addressing certain areas more strategically.

Respondents were also asked to comment on what facilities or things they thought were lacking in the town in general (one vote per respondent). Of the 51 responses, the most common were: shops, such as supermarkets, restaurants, bakeries, and clothing shops (11 votes), places where children can play (6 votes), cafes (6 votes), cultural facilities, such as galleries and museums (3 votes), medical clinics (3 votes), and community spaces (3 votes).

Taken together, the answers suggest that although the Michi-no-Eki is a standardized typology with a set of required programs, there is scope in Kamijima to develop a more bespoke program tailored to local needs. The most desired functions were shops, cafés, and spaces for children. These three amenities were also the top responses for what people thought was lacking in the town overall. The request for children’s spaces reflects a shortage of child-friendly environments, a concern that was confirmed during informal conversations. For example, one visitor commented on the absence of covered spaces where children could play safely on rainy days. While cafés and shops are common offerings of a Michi-no-Eki, the questionnaire clarified the importance of incorporating additional functions such as indoor play areas to address resident needs.

7.3.2 Comments on design proposals

A key design challenge set for students was making the Michi-no-Eki attractive and useful not only for tourists but also for residents. They were encouraged to consider how the project could generate income by utilizing local resources or tapping into local industry. Exhibition visitors were asked to comment on the ideas put forth by students and give reasons for why they found the proposal attractive. The aim was not to identify a “winning” proposal but to understand the design qualities and programmatic ideas that resonated with potential users. For example, comments for Student A focused on the project’s scale and response to the landscape:

The design of the coexistence with the island, the place, and the people was very good. It is great that the mountain landscape is not lost when viewed from the sea.

島と場所と人と共に共存するというデザインがとても素晴らしかった。海から見た時に山の景観の美しさが失われないのが素晴らしい。

Simple but stylish, in keeping with the landscape of Kamijima town.

上島町の風景と合っている、シンプルだけどオシャレ。

Unobtrusive and blends in well with the surrounding landscape.

目立たず周辺の景観にうまく馴染んでいる。

Similarly, the importance of the natural landscape was also a recurring point in the comments such as:

Good concept focusing on the relationship between land and sea. The best attraction of Kamijima is the scenery, so the concept of being able to experience both the sea and the mountains is good.

陸と海の関係に着目したコンセプトが良かった。上島の魅力は第一に景色だと思うので海山の両方を味わえるコンセプトが良い。

It makes good use of the characteristics of Kamijima town, which is surrounded by the sea.

海に囲まれている上島町の特徴をうまく活かしている。

Unobtrusive and blends in well with the surrounding landscape.

目立たず周辺の景観にうまく馴染んでいる。

Student B proposed a distinct program that utilized local resources—a boutique gin brewery using local citrus, and a smoked meat facility processing wild boar. Comments on this project highlighted both the program and its economic potential:

I think tourists would be interested in this place where local products can be processed. The hands-on experience is also a good way to create memories.

地元のを加工できる場所で観光客に興味関心を持ってもらえると思う。体験できるものも良い思い出作りになる。

I thought it was nice to have a gin brewery, a wild-boar-smoking workshop and a bar.
ジンの醸造所やイノシシの燻製工房、バーがあるのが面白い。

Good focus on craft gin, which is booming in Japan, and trying to make the business viable.

日本でもブームになっているクラフトジンに着目し経営を成り立たせようとしているのが良い。

Respondents also commented on the architectural language of Student B's proposal which drew on vernacular stone and timber construction:

I think the castle-like structure has a good impact.

お城のような造りがインパクトがあって良いと思う。

[I liked this project] because it incorporates regional and local architectural design.

地域、地元の建築意匠を取り入れているから。

The new proposal is interesting. The use of Japanese design is also great.

新しい提案がおもしろい。日本的なデザインの応用も素敵。

These comments offer insight into what aspects of the designs stood out for residents: sensitivity to the existing natural landscape, attention to scale, thoughtful use of local materials, and programs that could generate income through unique, locally grounded experiences. The feedback highlights both environmental concerns, such as not compromising existing views, and an interest in self-sustaining businesses that make use of the island's resources.

7.3.3 Rethinking *machizukuri*

When asked if respondents had expressed their opinions on projects in the town before the exhibition, only 12 out of 58 (20%) said yes. 80% of respondents stated they had not had a chance to express their thoughts on the town's projects and initiatives before the exhibition. The 20% that responded yes referred mainly to council meetings and a specific *machizukuri kondan-kai* (town-making discussion meeting). When I inquired about this meeting, I was told that it was an initiative from the town to invite citizen input but held in a relatively formal setting in the town hall. This meant that only certain citizens who were active and willing would participate, excluding others. Moreover, these meetings were mainly verbal discussions with little visual material. Therefore, although opportunities exist for citizens to express their thoughts on town-making activities, these may not always be the most accessible or inclusive. In contrast, the anonymous questionnaire at the exhibition allowed respondents to express their views freely, supported by visual media to help them understand the context and proposals being considered.

When asked about their understanding of *machizukuri*, a diverse set of answers was received. Some answers were straightforward and commented on how *machizukuri* equaled a thriving and healthy town community:

Revitalizing the town.

町の活性化。

To connect and revitalize the people within the town. To create a better environment for visitors by the people of the town.

町の中で人々がつながり活性化すること。町の人々によって町を訪れる人にとってより良い環境になること。

Liven up the town.

町を盛り上げる。

Exuding vitality.

活気が出る。

Others referred to the participatory nature of *machizukuri* as a process:

Everyone makes the town.

みんなが町をつくっていく。

Various people can be involved along with the residents.

住民と共にいろんな人が関われる。

Some noted the difference between “things” (*mono*), or hardware, and “people” (*hito*), or software, with a general understanding that *machizukuri* should focus more on the people and their lives at the center of activities:

Firstly, to create “people.”

まずは「人」づくり。

To add attraction in terms of hardware and software to the original good qualities of the area.

元からあるその土地の良さに、ハード・ソフト面でプラスの魅力を加えること。

Aim to be more rooted in the community and not just a development.

ただの開発に終わらず、地域により根差したものを目指すこと

It is not just about making things.

モノづくりだけではない。

I believe that people's lives lead to the creation of the town.

人の生活がまちを作っていくことに繋がると思う。

To create an ibasho [place of belonging] and yohaku [blank canvas].

居場所と余白づくり。

One comment countered the above and gave an answer that reflected their impression of *machizukuri* as something not focused on people but on “building things”:

It gives the image of building things. And the image of costing money.

ものを建てるイメージ。お金を使うイメージ。

The answers on the perceptions and understanding of *machizukuri* show how the term means different things to different people. These include both positive and negative perceptions which show contrasting understandings and experiences. There appears to be a gap between what some believe *machizukuri* should be and what some think it currently is. The first example shows that while respondents note that *machizukuri* should be focusing on both the soft and hard infrastructure, the last comment above shows that the image of *machizukuri* can be perceived to have an overemphasis on building “things” that cost money rather than being people focused. Another gap is that though respondents noted that

machizukuri should focus on people and participation, one respondent said the process may not be familiar to everyday citizens, especially in a rural context:

The word gives the impression of “environmental design.” The image of the word is that of professionals who are aware of it and use it. I don't think it is a word that citizens are very aware of.

言葉のイメージは「環境デザイン」という印象を受ける。専門家の人々が意識を持ち使っているイメージ。市民レベルではあまり意識されていない言葉のような気がする。

These responses highlight both the richness and the ambiguity of *machizukuri*. The term accommodates multiple and sometimes conflicting understandings: as revitalization, as participatory practice, as people-centered town-making, but also as costly development. As Satoh (2020, 74) argues, because “*machizukuri* practice focuses on solving particular problems in a dedicated way by the local people and for the local people, it is essential to first discover and develop a common understanding of what *machizukuri* and ‘machi’ are.” The questionnaire results point to the need for continued dialogue among island residents to clarify their priorities and articulate what kind of *machizukuri* they wish to pursue. Initiatives such as the exhibition can play a role in fostering such dialogue and reflection.

7.3.4 Encouraging local innovation

When asked if their interest in the town and its future development increased after the exhibition, 63 out of 67 respondents responded “yes” (94%). By giving people an opportunity to reflect and record their thoughts on a hypothetical project, the exhibition prompted them to think beyond the Michi-no-Eki itself and consider what kind of future they hoped for the town. In the final open-ended questions, respondents were asked to freely comment on the exhibition. Many described the exhibition as *tanoshii* (fun), *omoshiroi* (interesting), or *waku waku* (exciting), with several mentioning that they enjoyed seeing the different ideas and wished one of the proposals could be built and realized.

Several comments focused specifically on the participation of foreign students and the cross-cultural nature of the project.

It was good to learn about the architectural thinking of foreign students. It would be

good if such cultural exhibitions and events were held more frequently in the future.

外国の学生の建築的思考方を知れて良かった。これからもこのような文化的な展示やイベントが頻繁に実施されると良い。

We are glad as townspeople that you are taking the island seriously, a place you have never visited. I would love for everyone to come and visit us once the corona is over.

訪れたことの無い土地、島のことを真剣に考えていただいて町民として嬉しいです。コロナが収まったら是非みなさんに遊びに来てもらいたいです。

It's strange that people from overseas are interested in this island. I am very grateful to the graduate students who participated in this exhibition online.

不思議なくらい海外から来られた人々が弓削を気に入ってくれてます。今回の展示もオンラインでされた院生たち、すごく有難いです。

These responses suggest that, in a context where depopulation and uncertainty about the future can generate anxiety and pessimism (Sakuno 2023), the very fact that international students were seriously engaging with the island was meaningful to residents. Scholars have stressed the importance of restoring local pride in depopulated regions (Odagiri 2014). In this light, the value of Japan Studio lies not only in providing speculative ideas for a potential Michi-no-Eki but also in demonstrating that outsiders care about the town's future, which can uplift residents' pride and encourage citizen action.

Although students could not visit the islands in person and the semester is only running for a few months, they contributed to what Sakuno (2023) calls “local innovation”: new ideas and perspectives provided not only by external players who are concerned with managing population decline but also by those that respond to changing lifestyles, production modes, and modern needs. Student B's proposal for citrus-flavored craft gin and smoked wild boar products is one example of such locally grounded innovation, combining environmental management (wild boar) with value-added production (gin and smoked meat).

As external players from outside the region, students not only provide new and fresh perspectives but can help reveal overlooked assets, reframe resources, and proposed alternative uses that locals may not have considered. With citizen participation widely

identified as a key requirement for successful *machizukuri* and placemaking, the simple exhibition format, which is free and open to the public, can be an effective means to invite participation and discussion. Those who wish to record their thoughts on paper can do so via the questionnaire, which can then be collected, summarized, and given back to the town staff to help guide decision-making on future developments.

Subsequent iterations of Japan Studio have built on this feedback, continuing to explore the Michi-no-Eki theme while shifting toward the adaptive reuse of existing structures rather than the construction of a new building. This trajectory aligns with the views of many residents, who felt that it was unnecessary to spend money on a brand-new facility when underused public buildings already exist. In 2024, a town staff member informed me that the municipality was taking residents' opinions seriously and had begun surveying existing public facilities before advancing to the next phase of the project.

The exhibition and questionnaire results show how design education, even when conducted remotely, can support local reflection, bring new ideas into circulation, and create modest but meaningful opportunities for residents to participate in shaping their environment. These impacts form the basis for the concluding discussion that follows, which considers how Japan Studio contributes to broader debates on *kankei jinkō*, *machizukuri*, and postgrowth placemaking in rural Japan.

7.4 Chapter summary

This chapter has discussed how university students can become part of the *kankei jinkō*, contributing ideas, skills, and critical reflections even if they remain physically outside Japan. Unlike national initiatives that frame urban–rural exchange primarily as a pipeline toward migration, the cases discussed here—Tane, Koshirakura, Sagishima, and Japan Studio—emphasize learning, dialogue, and collaboration as valuable outcomes in their own right. Whether visiting in person or engaging remotely, students participate in placemaking by working with existing resources, knowledge, and materials by giving them new purposes and meaning to articulate new possibilities for local futures.

Though no physical interventions were carried out, Japan Studio extends *machizukuri* practices through an online-based design studio that culminated in a public exhibition on the islands. Students who could not visit the islands engaged in remote fieldwork and contributed

research, drawings, and speculative proposals. Their role in the placemaking process was not to produce immediately buildable projects but to visualize possible futures and rethink existing resources and industries, such as citrus farming, fisheries, and tourism, through new programs and spatial configurations. These speculative proposals served as prompts for discussion rather than fixed solutions. What we learned was the importance of providing an accessible platform to encounter diverse ideas, express opinions, and reflect on the town's future. The 69 questionnaires collected reveal that many respondents had never previously voiced their views on municipal projects, yet most reported that their interest in the town's future increased after seeing the exhibition. The municipality, in turn, gained a richer understanding of residents' preferences and concerns, which informed subsequent planning discussions, including a reconsideration of whether a new building was needed at all and a closer examination of existing public facilities.

For students, Japan Studio offered an opportunity to practice socially engaged design in a context of demographic decline and limited resources. Working with real stakeholders and receiving feedback from residents helped them grasp both the constraints and the possibilities of rural placemaking in a postgrowth context. Rather than treating rural areas as blank canvases, students were encouraged to foreground existing landscapes, cultures, and economies, and to approach speculation as a tool to support dialogue rather than impose solutions. At a conceptual level, Japan Studio broadens the notion of *kankei jinkō* to include international students and educators who build ongoing, if intermittent, relationships with rural communities. It demonstrates that design education can itself function as a form of *machizukuri* by creating opportunities for residents and outsiders to think together about the future. In doing so, the project reinforces the central argument of this thesis: that the countryside is a site of learning, experimentation, and collective imagination, where postgrowth placemaking is being worked out in practice.

Chapter 8: Conclusion

This research aimed to study the social and spatial dimensions of the *den-en kaiki* (return to the countryside) movement as they unfold on the ground in postgrowth Japan. It sought to understand who these rural in-migrants are, how they craft alternative ways of living, and how their activities contribute to new forms of placemaking in the periphery. Drawing on long-term ethnographic research across several towns and island communities, the study focused on young in-migrants engaged in everyday practices of entrepreneurship, repair and renovation, and care—activities that collectively signal the emergence of new values from a generation navigating precarity, environmental crises, and searching for meaning and fulfilment beyond the urban economy.

For many young Japanese today who have grown up in cities with little experience of rural living, the idea of the rural and associated concepts such as the *furusato* (hometown) has shifted from nostalgic imaginary to a tangible site of possibility for reconstructing personal and collective futures. I show how newcomers “remake” the rural through an examination of their motives, social relationships, and material practice. As Robertson (1991, 5) observed in *Native and Newcomers: Making and Remaking a Japanese City*, this process involves “remaking the past and imagining the future.” Likewise, this thesis demonstrates how new mobilities into and around the countryside are reshaping local identities and spatial practices as new in-migrants assert their own identity and meaning in their environment.

These transformations unfold within broader realities of living in contemporary postgrowth Japan, where many seek ways to live “beyond growth” by choosing to disassociate themselves from money and consumer culture in favor of experimenting with alternative economies of exchange rooted in reciprocity and resourcefulness. Practices such as renovation-based *machizukuri* exemplify socially engaged practices that prioritize social and environmental justice over profit and growth. Such practices also open the possibilities for a wider group of people, including nonprofessionals, to participate in placemaking efforts.

This conclusion revisits the research questions and synthesizes the findings around two central themes: 1) Rethinking counterurbanization and rural mobilities 2) Rethinking Placemaking in the periphery. It then outlines the key theoretical and empirical contributions

and provides some suggestions for policy recommendations, offers directions for future research, and closes with final remarks.

8.1 Rethinking counterurbanization and rural mobilities

The first question the thesis set out to answer was:

- 1) Who are the young in-migrants and why are they choosing to live in shrinking communities?

The findings from Chapter 4 and 5 show that young in-migrants to rural Japan constitute a far more heterogeneous group than existing migration paradigms imply. They suggest that rural mobility in postgrowth Japan is better understood as a spectrum of experimental, often provisional, movements shaped by *kurashi kata* (ways of living) rather than by amenity-seeking or linear, one-way migration. Today's rural in-migrants include precariously employed youth seeking refuge from urban pressures; former salary workers like Mai who turn toward frugality and self-sufficiency; individuals like Aiko who pursue non-work-oriented forms of living made possible by low rural living costs; Yuri and Jun using rural spaces as a temporary escape from early career precarity; and U-turners who rediscover the value of their hometowns and feel responsible to revitalize them. Their decisions are shaped by generational value shifts, stagnant wages, declining lifetime employment, and critical events such as the 2011 disaster and the COVID-19 pandemic, which collectively challenge urban-centered, growth-dependent life courses.

The “good life” imagined by these young in-migrants is not a romantic return to the past or simplicity but a pursuit of self-actualization (*jiko jitsugen*), which many defined as the ability to live freely (*jiyū ni kurasu*) or to liberate oneself (*jibun o kaihō suru*). Migration thus represents an ongoing process of becoming rather than a final destination. Many combine agricultural work, craft, or hospitality with other forms of flexible employment, referring to themselves as *hyakushō* in an attempt to reclaim a sense of autonomy and self-reliance. Yet, despite this search for fulfilment, their lives remain marked by economic precarity, juggling multiple jobs, and struggle with work-life balance, offset somewhat by the low cost of living and cheap or free rent. They perceive this precarious freedom as preferable to stable but unfulfilling salaried work and value the ability to organize time and labor on their own terms.

Indeed, the COVID-19 pandemic has shown the resilience and adaptability of rural entrepreneurs due to their smallness, adaptability and strong social networks.

Importantly, migration to the countryside is no longer limited to full-time, permanent relocation. Even those who appear well settled, have started their own business, or have purchased and renovated *akiya* often keep their options open and view rural life as one chapter in a longer journey of experimentation. The younger generation is highly mobile, and their personal circumstances can change at any moment, prompting a return to city living or a move to other rural areas. This mobility within rootedness results in a blurring between urban and rural life and more fluid movements that go beyond traditional understandings of migration.

The rise of *kankei jinkō* introduces a spectrum of relational connections including remote workers, repeat visitors, dual residents, and temporary collaborators, who maintain urban ties while forming meaningful links to rural communities. These individuals may not become residents, yet they participate in local life, contribute skills and networks, and help sustain cultural, social, and economic activities. While their contributions vary (and some have even been criticized as freeloaders who take advantage of rural services and facilities without paying local taxes), my fieldwork has shown the importance of inclusive third spaces such as guesthouses, cafés, and other public facilities where connections and emotional bonds can deepen. In such spaces, social capital is strengthened between visitors, in-migrants, and locals.

The combined picture is one of mobility as ongoing, nonlinear, and relational, embedded in broader socio-economic shifts and generational transformations. Young people choose shrinking rural communities not simply to escape cities but to construct alternative life pathways grounded in autonomy, experimentation, belonging, and more-than-economic values. The decline of stable employment and desire for meaning beyond consumerism have prompted young people to seek other ways of living and working. The countryside offers both a material and symbolic frontier for such experimentation and a more accessible pathway than overseas migration. Alongside the rise of the *kankei jinkō*, these patterns reveal a generational shift toward valuing autonomy, self-expression, and social connection. Yet, these aspirations coexist with continuing challenges—ongoing precarity and dealing with human relations (*ningen kankei*) in a small community, which should not be underestimated. The next section traces how the increased mobilities of young in-migrants materialize in

space through practices of repair and renovation, arguing that placemaking in the periphery is increasingly centered on collective efforts that hint at the possibilities of living beyond growth.

8.2 Rethinking placemaking in the periphery

The second research question asked:

- 2) How are young in-migrants reshaping and transforming rural spaces through *akiya* renovation?

Chapter 6 showed that young in-migrants, together with their networks of collaborators, are transforming rural space through everyday practices of repair, reuse, and DIY renovation that challenge conventional growth-oriented architectural production. These practices constitute a form of grassroots placemaking that is slow, relational, and embedded in everyday life. Through this process, social bonds are strengthened and new communities form over shared activities such as building, cleaning, cooking, and working together on a shared goal. In this way, in-migrants can become active placemakers who lead the process of identifying underused spaces, transform them through small-scale interventions, and experiment with new programs to ensure their continued use.

Rural in-migrant entrepreneurs create new values and aesthetics turning *akiya* into cafés, bookstores, and guesthouses, whereby formerly private spaces can be places of gathering and interaction. In addition to tangible changes, they also increase the vitality of the islands by organizing various activities such as end-of-year music concerts, craft and flea markets, beach cleans, and yoga sessions. The S Guesthouse exemplifies this model: initially a private business, it evolved into a community hub where the doors are never locked and frequently holds dinners and events. Several of my interlocutors were initially tourists staying at S Guesthouse before migrating, citing the connections they made at the guesthouse as being pivotal in their decision to move. One couple even met for the first time at the guesthouse and eventually married and started a family. They now run a café a short walk from the guesthouse, which has become another third space where young mothers and children frequently gather.

Such projects often rely on alternative economies of exchange, where social relations replace the capitalist mentality of paying someone for their time. Renovation of *akiya* rarely

makes financial sense, yet participants mobilize social networks, crowdfunding, and volunteer labor illustrating an economy based on reciprocity rather than profit. Collective building sites and community workshops thus operate as a type of commons where mutual help and cooperation replaces contractual exchange, embodying a rural version of “DIY urbanism” (Douglas 2014) that subverts capitalist development logics. While urban areas have long been contested with questions over belonging and “rights to the city,” as Lefebvre asked back in 1968, rural areas with their abundant space (including vacant space) and leftover material resources have allowed various players to experiment with their own version of rural commons. This practice of mutual support is also seen in everyday life where immigrants continue to support each other’s activities and businesses by attending events and purchasing goods and services from each other as described by one interlocuter as the *tomodachi keizai* (friend economy).

Still, the inclusiveness of these new spaces is uneven. Projects led by younger immigrants can unintentionally alienate long-term residents unfamiliar with their aesthetic or social codes. This is in line with previous research, where scholars found that some community members unrelated to the project may shy away from the newly transformed spaces as they are unsure of the etiquette or behavior expected of them in these new unfamiliar spaces (Florentin et al. 2023). To address such issues, some adjust prices for residents, offering discounts to locals, or opening unstaffed shops accessible to all. Balancing tourists’ expectations with residents’ needs, especially older adults, continues to be challenging but careful consideration of prices, programs, and activities that promote connections can foster inclusivity over time.

Japan Studio introduced in Chapter 7 further expanded the notion of inclusive participatory placemaking by involving Australian students in envisioning new community facilities. Beyond their proposals and output, the students’ involvement enhanced residents’ sense of pride and proved to local authorities the benefits of working collaboratively with diverse actors to promote inclusiveness and participation. Their involvement demonstrates that students and outsiders engaging through pedagogy and remote collaboration can also contribute to rural placemaking, expanding the concept of *kankei jinkō* to include international and intermittent participants.

These findings underscore how Japan’s *den’en kaiki* movement challenges conventional understandings of migration, mobilities, and placemaking. The findings show

that in-migrants are not simply moving to pre-existing places but are actively remaking them through slow, experimental, and often non-profitable ways. By documenting how in-migrants engage in practices of repair and reciprocal exchange, this research contributes to broader debates on postgrowth urbanism, everyday economies of care, and participatory design in peripheral contexts.

8.3 Contributions to the field

This thesis has made several contributions to the literature on rural mobilities, rural revitalization, and placemaking. It advances scholarship across three main areas: theorizing migration beyond urban-rural binaries, conceptualizing in-migrants as placemakers to advance rural placemaking, and offering a model for developing participatory and cross-cultural exchange through design education.

8.3.1 Expanding conceptions of counterurbanization

A central contribution lies in expanding the literature on counterurbanization and lifestyle migration. Drawing from detailed ethnographic cases, this research demonstrated that rural mobility in postgrowth Japan cannot be reduced to a singular archetype. Instead, it encompasses a spectrum of temporary, circular, and relational movements, including those who sustain long-term ties with rural communities without formal relocation. By understanding deeply about in-migrant's backgrounds and motivations, the study illuminates how young people's attitude and orientations toward work, value, and self-actualization reflect broader transformations in postgrowth Japan.

Empirically, this approach moves beyond demographic measures to reveal the qualitative dimensions of revitalization where newcomers including in-migrants, repeat visitors, and residents together reimagine rural futures. This perspective encourages policymakers and municipalities to shift from numerical targets toward evaluating how to support diverse actors, including the *kankei jinkō*, to contribute to the social, cultural, and spatial vitality of rural communities.

8.3.2 Rural in-migrants as placemakers

This thesis contributes to architectural and anthropological scholarship by conceptualizing young rural in-migrants as active placemakers who transform the countryside through

entrepreneurship and renovation-based *machizukuri*. By situating *akiya* reuse at the intersection of the “social turn” in architecture and the “spatial turn” in anthropology and geography, the study bridges disciplinary debates on rural revitalization that are rarely considered together. Rather than treating architecture as the domain of professional designers or as the production of new buildings, the cases show how in-migrants generate a form of postgrowth architecture through practices of repair, maintenance, reciprocity, and collective effort. Their renovation of *akiya* are often without ownership or expectation of capital gain but rather grounded in DIY experimentation, circular material reuse and alternative economies of exchange that enact principles of social and environmental justice at the everyday level.

The Japanese cases enrich global discussions on degrowth urbanism, circular design, and low-impact living by offering examples of how renovation culture can reconfigure spatial practice beyond the growth paradigm. It advances the understanding of rural placemaking by shifting attention from professionals to the collective efforts of ordinary citizens. In the communities studied, in-migrants, longtime residents, students, visitors, and volunteers contribute to reshaping rural communities when brought together through shared visions, mutual support, and collaborative forms of making. Organizations such as Onomichi’s NPO Aki-P, volunteer collectives like Party Architecture and Onomichi Labyrinth House, demonstrate how the pooling of tools, skills, and networks can empower individuals to undertake renovation projects that would be impossible alone. These shared renovation efforts have become powerful platforms for gathering people, fostering new social relations, and cultivating a sense of common purpose. Renovation becomes not only a spatial intervention but a social process that gathers diverse people to reshape their environment according to their needs.

8.3.3 Methodological and educational innovation

Methodologically, the research demonstrates the value of a multi-scalar ethnographic approach that integrates participant observation, design research, and collaboration across disciplinary boundaries. Japan Studio extended this engagement by positioning foreign architecture students as members of the *kankei jinkō*, exploring how external participants can contribute to rural placemaking and co-production. This experiment advances models of participatory and transnational placemaking, aligning with Lepofsky and Fraser’s (2003) concept of “flexible citizenship,” where belonging is enacted through civic participation

rather than residency. By incorporating students, local residents, and government officials into a shared design process, the project highlights the methodological value of studying placemaking not only through observation but also through hands-on collaboration.

Beyond its ethnographic contributions, Japan Studio offers a replicable model for inclusive placemaking within architectural education. Rather than treating rural areas as blank sites for speculative intervention, the studio foregrounds existing landscapes, cultural practices, and local knowledge by centering community voices at the center of the design inquiry. The studio's hybrid format further widened participation, enabling students unable to travel to conduct remote ethnography and translate local challenges into spatial propositions. This approach shows how design education itself can become a form of placemaking by creating a platform that gathers diverse voices to consider shared visions for the future.

Together, the above contributions reframe *den'en kaiki* not simply as demographic movement but as a cultural and socio-spatial practice. By connecting the lived realities of migration, entrepreneurship and renovation to global discourses on postgrowth and degrowth, this thesis positions rural Japan as a laboratory for alternative futures where new forms of making, living, and caring are actively being tested.

8.3.4 Toward a model of postgrowth governance

Several policy recommendations are drawn from the research findings. The thesis reconfirms that rural revitalization policies must shift away from approaches that focus narrowly on increasing in-migrant numbers and attracting entrepreneurial “talent,” and instead prioritize the everyday conditions that enable diverse residents and *kankei jinkō* to build meaningful, livable futures in shrinking communities.

First, policies should facilitate access to *akiya* by strengthening existing *akiya* banks, clarifying ownership, and supporting intermediaries such as NPOs, renovation collectives, and local cooperatives who can mediate between owners, newcomers, and municipal authorities. These intermediaries play a crucial role not only in matching people with houses but also in lowering risks for first-time renovators, providing shared tools and spaces, and building supportive social networks that make long-term settlement more viable.

Second, municipalities should invest in enabling infrastructures of postgrowth placemaking to support both newcomers and long-term residents to experiment with

renovation, reuse, and small-scale entrepreneurship. This includes funding DIY workshops, material reuse depots, and community tool libraries that reduce barriers to participation while fostering intergenerational skills exchange. Policies can also support flexible forms of work and recognize the importance of part-time, multi-income livelihoods common among in-migrants. Rather than privileging large developments, rural policy can better support resilience by encouraging small, adaptive projects rooted in sufficiency, repair, and local knowledge.

Finally, education and cultural exchange should not be overlooked as a form of rural revitalization. Projects such as Japan Studio demonstrate that students, visitors, and international participants can become part of the *kankei jinkō*, contributing new ideas, research, and reflections even without permanent relocation. Municipalities can increase their capacity by partnering with universities, community groups, and creative practitioners to develop inclusive, low-cost programs that foster dialogue, cultural exchange, and collective imagination. These initiatives expand who is considered a stakeholder in rural futures and broaden the scope of revitalization beyond demographic metrics to include creativity, care, and social connection. Together, these recommendations support a transition toward postgrowth forms of revitalization that strengthen community resilience by investing in relationships, reuse, and shared stewardship.

8.4 Future research

Like all ethnographic research, the findings are shaped by the temporal and geographical scope of the fieldwork which focused on a small cluster of towns and islands over a limited period of time. The number of interviews necessarily constrained the breadth of perspectives. As such, the results should not be generalized. The cases examined point to several promising directions for future research.

First, this thesis has shown the potential of renovation-led initiatives as a catalyst for revitalization. Further research is needed to understand how renovation communities take shape across different regions of Japan, such as the town of Suwa in Nagano Prefecture, where ReBuilding Centre Japan has become a major DIY hub attracting newcomers to the area. Comparative analysis could illuminate how local histories, resource ecologies, and the presence of external actors shape distinct models of renovation *machizukuri*. Further research might also extend beyond Japan to explore other post-industrial or depopulating regions in

Europe, East Asia, or North America, contributing to a broader comparative understanding of how post-industrial rural contexts mobilize repair, reuse, and alternative economies in the search for sustainable futures.

Second, future research should attend to the diversification of in-migrants arriving in rural Japan. Although this thesis has focused primarily on domestic migrants, international residents are increasingly playing important roles in rural economies and communities. During fieldwork, I encountered young people from the United States, New Zealand, and France, who had settled on the islands, as well as Southeast Asian migrant laborers employed in the shipbuilding industry. Their experiences highlight the emergence of a more cosmopolitan rurality and offer opportunities to examine how transnational mobilities intersect with local revitalization efforts. Comparing the motivations, livelihoods, and visions of international and domestic newcomers would deepen our understanding of the evolving “global countryside” (Woods 2007).

Third, there is a need for longitudinal research on the long-term dynamics of rural placemaking. While renovation-based *machizukuri* offers promising pathways for more democratic and inclusive forms of rural revitalization, it also carries risks. As noted by Milbourne and Kitchen (2014), a common paradox present in many rural places is that although rural mobilities sustain communities, it can also override the original essence of rural places. While participatory practices such as renovation *machizukuri* represent promising steps for more democratic and inclusive placemaking, they can also become exclusionary spaces or produce new hierarchies. This kind of social division between groups has been mentioned in the placemaking literature in various ways, including “exclusion,” “alienation,” and “gentrification,” referring to the difficulties encountered by residents to participate in the new changes after the placemaking initiative is completed (Akbar and Edelenbos 2021). Further longitudinal research is needed to understand how long-term residents negotiate access, ownership, and belonging over time.

Finally, there is room to delve deeper into the aesthetics of rural placemaking from both online and offline perspectives. Many in-migrants increasingly curate their experiences through social media, where images of renovated homes, cafes, and landscapes circulate on platforms like Facebook and Instagram. When in-migrants post pictures online to a broad audience, they not only promote certain aesthetics to tourists but also shape how potential in-migrants envision rural life. These contribute to what Zhao (2023) calls “aesthetic

placemaking,” whereby the atmosphere of rural places is co-created by in-migrants online. Further research could examine digital placemaking and trace how online representation and offline practice constitute new rural imaginaries of how the countryside is not only rebuilt but represented in the digital age.

8.5 Final remarks

The rising interest in rural Japan amongst young urbanites is not only a result of government initiatives designed to counter depopulation. It also reflects a deeper shift in values amongst a generation seeking fulfilment, autonomy, and the freedom to construct their ideal way of life. As Japan continues to experience economic and population slowdown, young people in rural areas are encountering distinct opportunities and constraints that differ from those in societies still oriented toward growth. I have shown that their quest to find a meaningful life in the countryside is a socio-spatial process of constantly “remaking” their lives and living environments. This remaking unfolds in tangible ways, through physical and spatial transformations, and also in intangible ways, through the social relations that collectively shape the imaginaries of rural life.

During my follow-up fieldwork in 2025, I caught up with an interlocutor who had recently become an elected town council member. He described his definition of revitalization as *mirai-zukuri*, or “building the future”—a term that replaces the *machi* (town) in *machizukuri* with *mirai* (future). His comments capture a broader sentiment: the recognition that the future of rural Japan is not about physical building or hard infrastructure but building common visions for the future through cultivating relationships, capacities, and shared values among diverse participants. Rural revitalization, in his framing, becomes a project of discovering the existing values and the richness of the islands (*shima no yutakasa ni kizuku*), rather than importing solutions from elsewhere.

This echoes recent scholarship on rural revitalization, which similarly criticizes the persistent focus on reversing population decline and instead advocates for a reconsideration of what revitalization means in the context of postgrowth. Thelen (2022) questions the assumption that shrinkage must be resisted, suggesting decline may create opportunities for better socio-cultural conditions, while Matanle and Rausch (2011) warn that the term “revitalization” misleadingly implies a return to growth that is looking to be more and more unfeasible, unachievable, and even undesirable. The findings of this thesis align with these

critiques and argue that meaningful revitalization can occur without demographic recovery. What produces vitality is not large-scale developments or reversing population loss, but from the everyday practices of mutual support, sharing resources, and creating inclusive spaces. Rather than attempting to fix rural decline through demographic solutions, the real task is to cultivate inclusive environments and spaces of possibility, as well as belonging, where diverse residents can craft lives that align with their means and values, something increasingly difficult for many young people constrained by the social and economic demands of urban life.

Across the narratives of my interlocutors, rural areas emerge as spaces where alternative lifestyles “beyond growth” can be lived out. Rather than idealizing these lifestyles or treating them as universally replicable, they can instead be read as an invitation to consider how we, across very different contexts, might also create meaningful lives with fewer resources. Although everyone has their own dreams and motivations, shared values include modest sufficiency using what is available, prioritizing social relations (as seen in the *tomodachi keizai*) and choosing not to work solely for money but for purpose, connection, and contentment. This can be seen in the comments of another interlocutor who described her modest aspiration, “*I do not wish for any big changes on this island [ōkiku henka hoshikunai] but to protect what we already have and pass it on to the next generation [ima aru mono o mamotte ikeru koto ga jisedai ni tsunagaru].*” She spoke about the joy she felt in the everyday little things such as collecting vegetables from the fields and sharing them with family and friends. Her use of words such as *sasayakana* (modest) and *jūbun* (enough) speak to a quiet contentment with what she has and wishes to preserve.

Japan, as one of the first countries to transition into a postgrowth era, offers valuable insights for other post-industrial nations experiencing population and economic slowdown. The practices observed among young in-migrants provide insight into the global search for alternative modes of living in an era of precarity, climate crisis, and widespread disillusionment with consumerist growth. Rural Japan provides a glimpse of what postgrowth futures might look like by building less, reusing what already exists, and learning to live well within our own and the planet’s ecological limits.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Interview table

Details of in-migrant				Motivation for moving	Current work/livelihood	Akiya use/renovation
1	Female	20s	J-turn	Overseas educated, worked in Tokyo, moved due to partner living in the area	COKT (regional revitalization cooperator)	Rents an <i>akiya</i> to live for time being with friend, bought an <i>akiya</i> and planning to renovate by DIY
2*	Female	30s	I-turn	Company worker in Tokyo, former COKT, moved soon after 311 wanting to be more self-sufficient.	Runs a small organic farm, hosts farm tours and stays, runs café few days a week.	Renovated an <i>akiya</i> to live in and run farm stays and café
3	Female	30s	I-turn	Transitioned to working remotely during COVID and wanted to escape out of Tokyo.	COKT	Rents an <i>akiya</i> to live in for the time being, looking for an <i>akiya</i> to buy
4*	Female	20s	I-turn	Graduated from Keio University, wish to escape stressful work in Tokyo and have some down time	COKT	None—rents an apartment from the town, no interest in <i>akiya</i>
5	Male	20s	I-turn	Moved to participate in farming program offered by government	Full-time farmer (not organic)	Rents and renovated an <i>akiya</i> to live in
6	Male	30s	U-turn	Born and grew up in area, left for university then returned and moved back into family home with parents.	Full-time worker at Town Hall.	Lives in family home, inherited relative's <i>akiya</i> and rents it to other in-migrants (no renovation yet)
7*	Male	30s	I-turn	Seeking to live in less crowded area, likes island scenery	Full-time worker at Town Hall	Rents an <i>akiya</i> to live in, not renovated.
8	Male	20s	I-turn	Visited friend in the area, ended up moving due to cheap living costs	Part-time jobs, running own tourism business	Rented an <i>akiya</i> before buying own <i>akiya</i> and renovating it
9	Female	20s	I-turn	Partner of in-migrant 8, also interested in island living	Part-time jobs, supporting partner's tourism business	Rented an <i>akiya</i> before buying own <i>akiya</i> and renovating it
10	Male	20s	I-turn	Family moved to island	Runs own sailing business	Rents an <i>akiya</i> to live, self-renovating another <i>akiya</i> to run business and tours
11	Male	20s	I-turn	Family moved to island	Works in seaweed farming and fishing	Bought an <i>akiya</i> and is self-renovating

12	Male	20s	I-turn	Family moved to island	Works at local charcoal maker	Rents an <i>akiya</i> to live in
13*	Male	20s	I-turn	Office worker in city, wanted new experience and applied for COKT	COKT	None
14*	Male	20s	I-turn	University graduate from Tokyo University, did not wish to find salaryman job in Tokyo	COKT	None
15	Female	30s	I-turn	Worked various part-time jobs, moved to island to raise family and help manage guesthouse	Manages guesthouse and works other part-time job	Rents an <i>akiya</i> to live in, not renovated
16	Female	40s	I-turn	Moved to island to help manage guesthouse	Manages guesthouse and works other part-time job	Rents an <i>akiya</i> to live in, not renovated
17	Female	30s	U-turn	Born and raised in island, fell sick working in city and returned to hometown	Works at family business running cafe	None
18	Female	20s	Relationship population	Worked various part-time jobs, came to island as a helper at guesthouse	Working part-time job in hometown, visits islands often	None
19	Female	30s	Relationship Population	Originally visited as tourist, now visits same guesthouse 1–2 times a year	Consultant in Tokyo, works remotely when visiting the island for 1–2 weeks	None
20	Male	40s	I-turn	Lifestyle migrant who moved with family with young child	Worked in real estate, now starting new businesses on island	Renovated <i>akiya</i> into general goods shop and another one into accommodation
21	Female	30s	U-turn	Moved to island where father is from, inherited old house	Bakery owner, engages in light farming	Renovated inherited <i>akiya</i> into bakery and house
22	Male	30s	I-turn	Partner of in-migrant 21, moved with family	Freelancer, editor, and photographer	As above, worked from home
23	Male	40s	U-turn	Moved back to hometown to look after family, inherited relative's house	Works in local charcoal industry	Owns <i>akiya</i> inherited from family
24	Male	40s	I-turn	Worked in city before moving to be with partner who is from the island	Started own business in citrus industry	Rents <i>akiya</i> to live in
25	Male	30s	I-turn	Worked in a nearby city before moving to islands, thinking it has potential as people don't know about it	Started own business in citrus industry	Renovated <i>akiya</i> into cafe

26	Female	40s	I-turn	Wife of in-migrant 20, lifestyle migrant who moved with family with young child	Shop owner previously, opened similar shop on island while looking after young children	Renovated <i>akiya</i> into general goods shop and another one into accommodation
27	Male	20s	U-turn	Born and grew up on island, left for university and returned to raise young children, motivated to revitalize hometown	Opened own clinic to help older residents, engages in various community activities	None, not interested in <i>akiya</i> , wishes to build a new house one day for family
28	Female	20s	U-turn	Born and grew up on island, left for university and studied overseas, returned with intent to start own business and revitalize hometown	Working multiple part-time jobs, helps with family farm, working on starting own tourism guiding company	Not yet but plans to find <i>akiya</i> and renovate for business when opportunity arises/saves up money
29	Female	30s	I-turn	Worked as a helper at guesthouse for few weeks, then moved after a few years working in nearby town	Worked part-time job at restaurant, now raising young child while working on starting own food-related business	Rents <i>akiya</i> to live in, no renovation, eventually wishes to find permanent house for family
30*	Male	40s	I-turn	Moved with family to take part in COKT program, stayed on the island after finishing program.	Café owner, beekeeper, runs café with partner.	Bought <i>akiya</i> , renovated with carpenter into house and café.
31	Female	30s	I-turn	Worked part-time job in Tokyo, visited island as tourist and moved, started café with friend	Runs a local café 3 days a week while raising two young children	Renting <i>akiya</i> from town, renovated with help of friends into cafe
32	Male	30s	I-turn	Visited as tourist and stayed in local guesthouse, met and married in-migrant 31	Helps run café with in-migrant 31, works 4–5 other part-time jobs including cleaning campsite and other jobs around the town.	Helped to renovate <i>akiya</i> into café with in-migrant31
33*	Female	20s	I-turn	Graduated from Keio University, wished to learn about wine so moved to work in local winery	Working as staff at local winery	Rents <i>akiya</i> to live in
34	Male	20s	Relationship population	University student, splitting time between Hiroshima and island	Studying as student and operating a bar on island as hobby	Renovating <i>akiya</i> into second home
35	Male	20s	Relationship population	Worked in Tokyo but quit and now mainly live on island motivated to do something meaningful	Works for local start-up, self-directs own project based on art education	Renovated <i>akiya</i> into community space as part of start-up project

36	Female	20s	U-turn	Born and grew up on island, left for university, returned to live with family and help revitalize hometown	Opened small café and working on expanding into accommodation business on home island	Renovated small <i>akiya</i> into café through DIY and help of friends and local carpenter
37	Male	20s	U-turn	Born and grew up on island, left for university, returned to help revitalize hometown	Opened small hotel and accommodation	Renovated vacant shop house into hotel, crowdfunded to renovate another shop house into accommodation
38	Female	30s	I-turn	Worked in city, motivated to move due to working remotely during COVID-19	Worked remotely online, rented vacant citrus farm and starting farming citrus as hobby, plans to open guesthouse in future	Renovating <i>akiya</i> into guesthouse
39	Male	30s	I-turn	Partner of in-migrant 38, moved together	Same as in-migrant 38	Same as in-migrant 38
40	Male	40s	I-turn	Was working part-time jobs in Tokyo to support himself as an artist, moved to island in search for a rent-free studio	Artist	Received <i>akiya</i> for free in and renovated into home and studio with other in-migrants
41	Male	40s	U-turn	Returned to hometown due to cheap cost of living and availability of <i>akiya</i>	Artist and writer	Inherited <i>akiya</i> to live, renovating <i>akiya</i> into community project
42	Female	30s	U-turn	Born and grew up on island, left for university and lived overseas for working holiday, returned to live with family	Works part-time helping friend's café and touring business, prefers to find a stable job, helps at family's farm	None, lives with parents in family home
43*	Male	30s	U-turn	Moved during COVID-19, family from the island	Youtuber, café owner, remote worker	DIY renovation of <i>akiya</i> into café and home
44	Female	30s	I-turn	Worked in big city, wanted to change her lifestyle after 3/11 and live more self-sufficient and healthy life	Multiple businesses—crowdfunded to create café, fashion atelier, accommodation and rental space	DIY and work with local carpenters to renovate <i>akiya</i> into home and studio/shop, now recruiting foreigners online to help through work aways
45	Male	30s	I-turn	Worked as English teacher and moved to island to start a farm	Full-time farmer, part-time English teacher, and researcher	DIY renovated barn on farm to live, also helped renovate in-migrant 46's <i>akiya</i> project into café
46	Female	30s	I-turn	Working in Tokyo and visited islands as tourist. Aspired to start a new chapter in life	Textile artist working with local textile and natural dyes, helps run the farm with in-migrant 45	Lives in DIY renovated barn, renovating larger <i>akiya</i> into studio and café/restaurant with local carpenters and in-migrant 45

47	Male	30s	I-turn	Was working in company in Tokyo, wished to start new chapter to fulfil dream of owning café in 30s	Renovated <i>akiya</i> with partner and runs a small café	Renovated small <i>akiya</i> into café with carpenter
48	Female	30s	I-turn	Kaze no hito—drifting around place to place, working various odd jobs or living at family home, self-described NEET	NEET—not actively working, works part-time jobs seasonally to cover living expenses	Lives in renovated <i>akiya</i> by others rent free
49	Female	30s	I-turn	Worked in Tokyo, went to a migration fair and learnt about the island, also knew about COKT program from magazines	Moved to island to become COKT, opened bookstore and cafe after three-year program ended	Renovated <i>akiya</i> into café and bookstore, wished to create a community space on island
50	Male	30s	I-turn	Partner of in-migrant 49, disliked crowded cities and wanted fresh start	Moved with partner, started coffee and runs café next to bookstore	Same as in-migrant 49
51	Female	30s	J-turn	Studied in Onomichi, returned after working in Tokyo	Worked various part-time jobs, runs own jewelry business	Rents <i>akiya</i> to live in, volunteers at friend's <i>akiya</i> renovation project
52	Male	30s	I-turn	Lived overseas, moved for new lifestyle and availability of free <i>akiya</i>	Researcher	Received <i>akiya</i> , renovating with friends
53	Female	30s	I-turn	Worked in Tokyo, looking for small town to raise family	Raises family while managing artist in residence	Rents <i>akiya</i> to live in with family, helps manage another <i>akiya</i> renovated into artist-in-residence
54	Female	30s	U-turn	Born and grew up in town	Works full-time at town hall	Renovated <i>akiya</i> to live in and transformed ground floor into bar
55	Male	40s	J-turn	Lived in Tokyo and overseas, moved to area due to availability of <i>akiya</i>	Runs a guesthouse	DIY renovated an <i>akiya</i> into guesthouse and café
56	Male	40s	I-turn	Worked part-time jobs in Tokyo struggling with high rent, moved due to availability of <i>akiya</i>	Manages a guesthouse and works as a freelance artist.	DIY renovated <i>akiya</i> to live, renovated another <i>akiya</i> into guesthouse with local NPO
57	Female	40s	U-turn	Born and grew up in area, left for work, returned as realized charm of hometown and wish to preserve it	Founded and runs NPO supporting <i>akiya</i> renovation and management in area	Started NPO aimed at promoting <i>akiya</i> renovation and reuse, regularly organizes events.
58	Male	20s	I-turn	Traveling around Japan, arrived in area as traveler and decided to stay	Volunteers and help at friend's businesses, photographer	Found <i>akiya</i> and self-renovating with friends and in-migrant 59
59	Female	20s	I-turn	Traveling around Japan with in-migrant 58, arrived in area as traveller and decided to stay for the time being	Self-described NEET	Found <i>akiya</i> and self-renovating with friends and in-migrant 58

60	Male	30s	I-turn	From overseas, moved to start own small business in small town.	Runs a second-hand clothing with partner, some translation work.	Found <i>akiya</i> through local NPO and renovated into shop
61	Male	30s	U-turn	From the area, left for education and work, returned to live near family.	Self-employed web designer.	Rents vacant shop along shopping street and renovated into community space with friends
62*	Male	30s	I-turn	Traveler, moved to start small baked goods store with partner	Writer, operates a small baked goods store with partner	Crowdfunded to self-renovate <i>akiya</i> into small café

*As of May 2025, the in-migrant has moved out of the study area

Appendix B: Sample interview

Interview 36

Interview date: August 2021

Name of informant and island name have been removed to ensure anonymity.

Age: 20s

U-turner. Born on island in study area.

Current Place of Residence: on home island of birth

Current livelihood: Transformed a small akiya through DIY into a café with help of local carpenters and friends, also engages in subsistence farming. Falls into self-employed and half agriculture half-x category.

ご自身の経歴を簡潔に説明していただけますか？

Can you please briefly outline your background?

私は中学生の頃、早く島の外へ行きたいと思っていました。

高校生の時には岡山県に住んでいました。そこでは高校の寮で生活をしていました。

次に、大学に行くため[兵庫県にある都市]で一人暮らしをしました。その後、最初の仕事で[兵庫県の別の都市]に引っ越しました。こども園の先生、フォトスタジオのアシスタントなどをしました。

When I was in junior high school, I wanted to leave the Island as soon as possible.

When I was in high school, I lived in Okayama Prefecture. I lived in a high school dormitory there. Next, I lived alone in [a city in Hyogo Prefecture] to attend university. After that, I moved to [a different city in Hyogo] for my first job. I worked as a kindergarten teacher and a photo studio assistant.

なぜ島に戻ることにしたのですか？

Why did you decide to move back to your home island?

フォトスタジオの仕事を辞めたときに決めました。

私は、住む場所と暮らし方を大切に思い、一番好きな方を選びました。

以前、島で暮らしていた頃は、子どもの頃は純粹に楽しかったです。でも大人になりかけのときは、選択肢が少ない小さな世界にいる気分でした。

今、大人なりいろんな人に会い、自分で選ぶことができるようになったので、自分で選んで帰ってきました。

I decided when I left my job at the photo studio.

I value where I live and how I live, so I chose the place I like best.

When I used to live on the island, I had a pure and enjoyable childhood. But as I approached adulthood, I felt like I was living in a small world with few choices.

Now that I'm an adult and have met many different people, I realize that I can make my own choices, so I chose to come back to the island.

Now, as an adult, I have met many different people (including many newcomers) and I know that I can make my own choices, so I chose to come back.

こども園の先生として働いていた後、カフェをオープンしました。なぜそのタイミングで辞めて自分のビジネスを始めることにしたのですか？

You worked as a kindergarten teacher for a while before setting up your cafe. What made you feel it was the right time to quit and start your own business?

島に帰ってきて約3年経ち、素敵な友人関係が増えたことで勇気が出たと思います。

It's been about three years since I returned to the island, and I think the wonderful friendships I've made have given me courage.

他にどのような活動に携わっていますか。例えば農業に興味がありますか？

What other activities are you involved in e.g. interest in farming?

はい、農業に興味があります。自分で畑をしています。それは自分が食べるためと、よくできた野菜を親戚や友人にあげるためです。

また、私は今「大地の再生」に興味があります。

フィールドワークから、防災や美しい自然の再生を学びたいと思っています。

Yes, I'm interested in agriculture. I have my own field, both to grow vegetables to eat myself and to give the vegetables I produce to my relatives and friends.

I'm also interested in "regenerating the earth."

I'd like to learn about disaster prevention and the regeneration of beautiful nature through fieldwork.

カフェを立ち上げたきっかけは何ですか？

What was the inspiration behind starting up your cafe?

自分と好きな人たちが居心地のいい場所を作りたいと思った。

好きな人とは友人、家族、地域の人、まだ会っていない人もです。

「カフェ」の要素を取り入れたのは、生計を立てるためです。

場所を運営して、私も生活をするために必要なお金を得るためです。

1 自分がやって楽しいこと

2 まだ誰もやっていないこと（x町にないこと）

3 自分の特性を活かせること

4 多くの人が興味のあること

5 誰かの役に立つこと

を考えた結果です。現時点の。

I wanted to create a comfortable place for myself and the people I love.

The people I love include friends, family, local people, and even people I haven't met yet.

The reason I incorporated the "cafe" element was to make a living.

Running the place would allow me to earn the money I need to live.

1 Something I enjoy doing

2 Something that no one else has done yet (something that doesn't exist in my hometown)

3 Something that I can use my skills to the fullest

4 Something that many people are interested in

5 Something that will be useful to someone

This is what I came up with as of now.

カフェを始める際に直面したいくつかの課題は何でしたか？

What are some challenges in starting the cafe?

母が心配して反対したことです。（運営していくための技術や経済的なことで）
私は応援して欲しかったし、不安になりました。

My mother was worried and opposed the idea (due to technical and financial issues related to running the business). I wanted her to support me, and it made me anxious.

空き家をどうやって見つけましたか？ 借りるのは簡単でしたか？ リース期間はどれくらいですか？

How did you find the vacant house? Was it easy to rent? How long is the lease?

実家のすぐ隣にあった空き家なので子どもの頃から知っていました。借りるための交渉はスムーズでした。（運が良かった）

リース期間は決めていません。

I've known about it since I was a child because it was an empty house right next to my parents' house. Negotiations to rent it went smoothly. (I was lucky.)

I didn't set a lease period.

DIY はどのくらいの割合で、どの分野で専門家の助けを得ましたか？

What proportion is DIY and what areas did you get professional help?

DIY50%. 天井の修理、床のコンクリート、電気配線、水道配管は専門家にお願いしました。また、解体や庭の整備、おすすめの材料をアドバイスしてもらうなどボランティアで専門家の支援を受けました。

DIY 50%. We asked professionals to repair the ceiling, lay concrete flooring, and install electrical wiring and plumbing. We also received volunteer support from professionals, who helped us with demolition and landscaping and advised us on recommended materials.

助けに来た人は誰ですか？ 彼らは主に知っている人ですか？

Who are the people who came to help you—are they mostly people you know?

友人です。中には友人の友人もいました。

They were friends. Some of them were friends of friends.

カフェにどのように資金を提供していますか？ それはすべて貯蓄からですか、それともローンを組むことからですか？

How are you funding the project? Is it all from savings or take out loans?

今回の資金は、全て貯蓄からです。

しかし、生活費や交通費などは家族からのサポートがあります。

All of the funding for this trip is coming from savings.

However, I am receiving support from my family for living expenses, transportation costs, etc.

材料の再利用の例はありますか？

Are there examples of reuse of materials?

昔カフェをしていた人からグラスや食器をもらいました。その人は同じ地域に住む人です。

他にも、本棚、足場板、鉄製のテーブルの足、本、キッチンの道具、扉を修理するためのガラス、椅子、電球、を寄付してもらいました。

We received glasses and crockery from a former cafe owner who lives in the same area.

Other items we received were bookshelves, scaffolding boards, iron table legs, books, kitchen utensils, glass to repair doors, chairs and light bulbs.

カフェを建てるプロセスは想像した通りですか、それとも異なりますか？

Is the process as you imagined or different?

想像していたより長い時間がかかりました。

It took longer than I had imagined.

この過程で何を学びましたか？ 次回はどうしますか？

What have you learnt during this process? What would you do differently next time?

友人や地域の人、家族に支えられて生きていると思いました。

次はもっと良いデザインにしたいです。

I felt that I was living with the support of my friends, local people, and family.

Next time, I want to make a better design.

カフェではどんな商品を売っていますか？ 地元で生産されたものはありますか？

What kind of items will you sell in your cafe? Are any of them locally produced?

コーヒー、紅茶、クロモジ茶、季節のジュース、季節の野菜スープ、おやつなどを考えています。

季節のジュースには、梅や柑橘など地元で生産したものです。野菜は地元の知り合いの農家や自分の畑でとれたものを使います。

I am considering coffee, black tea, Japanese green tea, seasonal juices, seasonal vegetable soups, snacks, and so on.

The seasonal juices will be made from locally produced ingredients such as plums and citrus fruits. The vegetables will be sourced from local farmers I know and from our own fields.

地元の人も観光客も、どのような顧客を惹きつけたいですか？どのようにビジネスを促進しますか？

What kind of customers do you hope to attract—both locals and tourists? How will you promote your business?

やさしくて、おもしろい人が集まってくれるといいなと思います。

促進は、人と人の繋がりです。話で広がればいいなと思います。

I hope that kind and interesting people will gather here.

I hope that promotion will spread through connections between people and conversation.

島で好きなことは何ですか？

What are some aspects you like about your home island?

まず一番には、子ども時代を過ごした場所であるから好きです。

他には、

- ・ ちょうどいい田舎
- ・ 海が近くにある
- ・ 空き家、空き地があるから自由にできる可能性がある
- ・ 気候がいい
- ・ 家族がいるから
- ・ 友人がいるから
- ・ 親切な人も多い

First and foremost, I love it because it's where I spent my childhood.

Other reasons include:

- It's just the right amount of rural.
- The sea is nearby.
- There are vacant houses and vacant lots, so there is potential for freedom.
- The climate is good.
- My family is there.
- My friends are there.
- There are many kind people.

不便な点や気に入らない点はありますか？

Is there anything inconvenient or aspects you don't like?

田舎特有の人々の噂話や、世代の価値観の違いで否定的なことを言われることがある。

例えば、「早く結婚をしないのか」「子どもを産むのか?」「フルタイムで働いていないのは怠けている」など。

Due to gossip specific to rural areas and differences in generational values, people may say negative things about you. For example, "Why don't you get married early?", "Are you going to have children?", "You're lazy if you're not working full-time," etc.

島は他の島と比べて何がユニークだと思いますか？

What do you find unique about home island compared to the other islands?

造船所の全盛期からの生活の歴史や残っている文化。

人口の減少で変わりゆく中で生きている人の暮らし。

あと、少しマニアックですが、島の匂いも違います。それは全ての島によって違うのかもしれないです。

The history of life and culture that remains from the shipyard's heyday.

The lives of people living in a changing environment due to population decline.

Also, this may be a bit obscure, but the scent of the island is different. Perhaps it differs from island to island.

地元の人として、島で利用できる施設やインフラについてどう思いますか？そこに住む地元の人々に利益をもたらすような改善点がありますか？

As a local, what is your opinion of the facilities and infrastructure available on the island?
Are there any improvements you would like to see that would benefit the locals living there?

しまなみ海道（西瀬戸自動車道）があることで、交通が便利です。

もう少し通行料金が安くなると嬉しいです。

環境に配慮して、下水処理の設備を充実させてほしいです。水は海に流れ繋がっています。

無理な開発でできた道路が山の環境を壊し、タイムラグを経て災害を引き起こしています。自然環境についても一度よく考え、改善して欲しい。

The Shimanami Kaido (Nishi-Seto Expressway) makes transportation convenient.

It would be nice if the tolls were a little cheaper.

I would like to see more sewage treatment facilities built with the environment in mind.
Water flows into the sea.

Roads built through excessive development are destroying the mountain environment and causing disasters after a time lag. I would like to see more consideration given to the natural environment and improvements made.

島は通常、人が通り抜ける場所ですが、実際には長期滞在する場所ではありません。同意しますか？これは正しい理解ですか？

The island is usually a place for people to pass through, but not really a place to stay long term. Is this correct?

はい。多くの観光客はそうです。

しかし、私の知っている人たちの中には、長期滞在をして休暇を楽しんでいます。

移住のための家を探すために滞在して、実際に家を見つけました。彼女は6ヶ月くらいかかりましたがその間も活動的でした。

長野に住む友人は冬の間に過ごす場所として利用しています。それは二拠点の生活です。

Yes, many tourists do.

However, some people I know stay for long periods of time to enjoy their holidays.

They stayed to look for a house to move into and actually found one. It took her about six months, but she remained active during that time.

A friend of mine who lives in Nagano uses it as a place to spend the winter. It's a two-base lifestyle.

ここでより多くの若者を引き付けるものは何だと思いますか？

What do you think will attract more young people here?

私は時間の使い方の自由だと思います。

ここでは自分の時間の使い方をほぼ全て自分で決めることができる。家賃の安い物件（空き家）土地が手に入り、自分の表現や理想の生活ができる。

そんなことが増えたら、もっとよくなると思います。

I believe in the freedom to use one's time as one wishes.

Here, one can decide almost entirely how to use one's time. One can obtain inexpensive housing (vacant houses) and land, and express oneself and live the life one desires.

If such opportunities increase, I believe things will become even better.

島に足りないものがありますか？

Is there anything missing on the island that you would like to have?

- ・若い人の価値観を否定しない大人
- ・もっと子どもを大切にする教育
- ・欲張りだけど、銭湯があるといいな！

- ・ Adults who don't reject the values of young people
- ・ Education that values children more
- ・ It's greedy, but I wish there was a public bath!

島の好きな場所はどこですか、理由は？

Favorite place on the island and why?

私は自分の家がある O 町が好きです。なぜなら子どもの頃に楽しく過ごした場所であり、家族が住んでいるからです。

I love my neighborhood, where my house is located. This is because it is a place where I had a lot of fun as a child and where my family lives.

友達と会うのに好きな場所は？

Favorite place to meet with friends?

尾道市街です。

Onomichi.



メルボルン大学院生による
上島町「道の駅」デザインアイデア報告展

アンケート用紙

本日はご来場いただきありがとうございました。
主催者のナンシーさんとメルボルン大学院生が今後の研究の参考にするために、アンケートへのご理解とご協力をお願いいたします。

該当する答えを○で囲むか、() 内に記入してください。

■ 年齡

- ・12歳以下 ・12歳以上の10代 ・20代 ・30代
・40代 ・50代 ・60代 ・70代以上

■ 上島町に来られた理由を教えてください。

- ・出身 ・転勤 ・進学 ・移住（Iターン/Uターン）
・観光 ・訪問 ・その他（ ）

■ 現在住んでいる都道府県と市町村名を教えてください。

- ・県内 () ・県外 ()

■ あなたは上島町に道の駅があつたら良いと思いますか？「はい」と答えた方は、町内のどこに道の駅ができれば良いと考えますか？

はい / いいえ (場所:)

■ あなたが上島町に現在足りていないと思う場所や施設はありますか？

()

裏面に続きます。



Appendix D: Exhibition questionnaire results

Exhibition #1:

19 July 2021 – 2 August 2021 at a local community facility (54 respondents)

Exhibition #2

18 Dec 2021 – 7 Jan 2022 at a local ferry port building (15 respondents)

Question 1:

Age 年齡

Age	No. of people Exhibition #1	No. of people Exhibition #2
12 and below	5	0
12–19	5	4
20–29	10	3
30–39	12	1
40–49	11	1
50–59	6	2
60–69	3	3
70 and above	3	1
Total	54	15

Question 2:

Reasons for visiting the island. 上島町に来られた理由を教えてください。

Reason	Exhibition #1	Exhibition #2	Total
Migrate 移住	23	0	23
Tourist 観光	10	2	12
Hometown 出身	8	8	16
Visiting 訪問	6	2	8
Work 転勤	2	0	2
School/Study 進学	2	1	3
Other その他	3	1	4
No Response 不明	0	1	1
Total	54	15	69

Question 3:

Place of residence. 現在住んでいる都道府県と市町村名を教えてください。

Place of residence	Exhibition #1	Exhibition #2	Total
Within the Town 町内	31	7	38
Outside Ehime Prefecture 県外	15	7	22
Within Ehime Prefecture 県内	7	1	8
Dual residence (in and out of the prefecture) 二拠点(県内外)	1	0	1
Total	54	15	69

Question 4:

Do you think it would be good if there was a roadside station in Kamijima town? If yes, where in the town do you think it would be good to have a roadside station?

あなたは上島町に道の駅があったら良いと思いますか? 「はい」と答えた方は、町内のどこに道の駅ができたら良いと考えますか?

Response	Exhibition #1	Exhibition #2	Total
Yes はい	43	12	55
No いいえ	3	2	5
Not sure 分からない	5	0	5
Total	51	14	65

For those who answered yes, some of the answers on where they thought would be good places include:

Somewhere near the sea or port. 海・港の近く。

Somewhere spacious with parking or on vacant land. 広い駐車場が取れる場所・空き地。

Somewhere near commercial areas. 商業施設の近く。

Somewhere near parks. 公園の近く。

Somewhere where there are no facilities around. 周りに施設が無い場所。

Near or combined with the current Sea Station (the name of the facility the exhibition is held in). 海の駅舎の近く又は合体させる。

Question 5:

What do you think is lacking in Kamijima Town?

あなたが上島町に現在足りていないと思う場所や施設はありますか？

Facilities/areas people find lacking	No. of responses
Shops (supermarkets, restaurants, bakeries, clothing shops, home centers, fishing tackle shops, bars, book shops, fishmongers etc) 店舗(スーパー、飲食店、パン屋、衣料品店、ホームセンター、釣具屋、バー、本屋、魚屋)	11
Places where children can play (obstacle course, places where you can play on a rainy day, places where middle and high school students can go). 子供の遊び場(アスレチック、雨の日も遊べる、中高生が行ける場所)	6
Cafés (including outdoor cafés) カフェ(屋外カフェ含む)	6
Cultural facilities (galleries, island museums, cinemas, concert venues) 文化施設(ギャラリー、島の博物館、映画館、コンサート会場)	3
Medical clinics 医療機関	3
Community Space コミュニティスペース	3
Seafood market 海鮮市場	2
Souvenir shop お土産ショップ	2
Larger yacht berths and pontoons より大きなヨットバースやポンツーン	2
Child welfare, educational institutions 児童福祉、教育機関	2
Campgrounds that one can use for no fee 無料キャンプ場	1
Disaster Shelter 災害用シェルター	1
Powerplants (e.g. biomass, solar) 発電所(バイオマス、ソーラーなど)	1
Table tennis facility 卓球場	1
A place where young people can challenge themselves 若者が挑戦できる場所	3
Wisdom to make use of facilities that are now adequate 今充分にある施設を活用する知恵	1
Self-help campaign for end-of-life 終活のための自己啓発運動	1
Not a box (referring to a building), but a mechanism to enjoy the fields and the sea 箱物ではなく、野山や海を楽しむ仕掛け	1
A place to showcase umi-hotaru (sea firefly) 海ほたるを紹介するところ	1

Total	51
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Question 6:

上島町に道の駅ができるとしたら、施設にあったら良い機能はなんですか? (複数回答可)

If a roadside station were to be built in Kamijima-cho, what features would you like to see in the facility? (Multiple answers allowed).

Features	Exhibition #1	Exhibition #2	Total
Café カフェ	37	9	46
A place to rest outdoors 屋外の休憩場所	26	7	33
Souvenir shop お土産ショップ	23	4	27
Seafood Market 海鮮市場	19	5	24
Kid's Room キッズルーム	17	4	21
Bakery パン屋	17	3	20
Art Gallery アートギャラリー	16	1	17
Bar バー	16	0	16
Migration support consultation services 移住相談窓口	12	2	14
Art galleries/museums 美術館/博物館	11	2	13
Brewery 醸造所	10	1	11
Workshop Space 作業用工房	9	1	10
Stage ステージ	8	1	9
Other*その他	7	2	9
Training hall 研修室	6	1	7
Total	234	43	277

Examples of “other” include rental cycle facility, hot springs, massage parlor, co-working space, and library.

Question 7:

The students from Melbourne created the final design proposal after much trial and error to ensure that the roadside station would be an attractive place not only for visitors but also for

residents. Which student's design caught your interest? Please share your reasons and impressions,

メルボルン大学院生たちは、道の駅が観光客だけではなく地域住民にも魅力的な場所になるように試行錯誤を重ね、最終的なデザイン案を作りました。どの学生のデザインに興味を持ちましたか? 理由と感想を教えてください。

Student	Reasons and impressions 理由・感想
Student A	The scenery is beautiful. 景色が綺麗。
	Very good! すごく良い!
	Clear and natural idea. 明快で自然なアイデア。
	The design of the coexistence with the island, the place and the people was very good. It is great that the mountain landscape is not lost when viewed from the sea. 島と場所と人と共に共存するというデザインがとても素晴らしかった。海から見た時に山の景観の美しさが失われないのが素晴らしい。
	Sense of scale e.g. indoor and outdoor spaces. It would be even better if the concreteness of the income and expenditure and the usability of the modular furniture could be further elaborated. 室内と室外スペースなどのスケール感。収支の具体性やモジュール家具の使い勝手などがさらにつめられるとさらに良い。
	Simple but stylish, in keeping with the landscape of Kamijima town. 上島町の風景と合っている、シンプルだけどオシャレ。
	A design that I would like to visit if it were in another town. もし他の町にあっても行きたいと思えるデザイン。
	A very open design that matches the landscape of the island とても開放的なデザインで島の風景にマッチしている。
	Interesting roof design. The open space is good. 屋根のデザインが面白い。オープンなスペースがよい。
	Simple design, very functional for the island, low maintenance requirements. Would be better with solar panels, but it depends if the environment can make it possible. It

	looks beautiful too. シンプルなデザイン、弓削にとってとても機能的、メンテナンスの必要性が低い。ソーラーパネルがあるとより良いが、それを可能にする環境が整っている。見た目も美しい。
	Unobtrusive and blends in well with the surrounding landscape. 目立たず周辺の景観にうまく馴染んでいる。
	The design is great. デザインが素晴らしい。
	The design of the exterior is great. デザインの外観が素敵。
	The building design is great. I would like to go there. 建物デザインがすごく素敵だった。行ってみたい。
	It represents the local color well. ローカルカラー表現良い。
Student B	The poster was difficult to read, but there are functional and efficient in terms of area. ポスターは見にくい、面積に対して機能性があり無駄が無い。
	I thought it was great that the facility itself is a village made up of multiple buildings, and that the scenery changes depending on the path and angle. 複数の建物の集合体で施設そのものが村になっていることや、いくつかの通り道、角度によって変わる景色良いと思った。
	I thought it was nice to have a gin brewery, a wild boar smoking workshop and a bar. ジンの醸造所やイノシシの燻製工房、バーがあるのが面白い。
	I think the castle-like structure has good impact. お城のような造りがインパクトがあって良いと思う。
	I think tourists would be interested in this place where local products can be processed. The hands-on experience is also a good way to create memories. 地元のを加工できる場所で観光客に興味関心を持ってもらえると思う。体験できるものも良い思い出作りになる。
	The buildings that match the stone walls are attractive. I thought the ideas for short-term accommodation facilities, migration consultation centers, and the creation of new speciality products were very good. 石垣に合う建物が魅力的。短期滞在施設、移住相談窓口、新しい特産品作

	りなどのアイデアがとても良いと思った。
	Appearance and concept. 外観とコンセプト。
	(I liked this project) because it incorporates regional and local architectural design. 地域、地元の建築意匠を取り入れているから。
	The new proposal is interesting. The use of Japanese design is also great. 新しい提案がおもしろい。日本的なデザインの応用も素敵。
	I was interested in the gin and salt. The look reminds me of a Japanese castle, and it's nice without being too modern. ジンと塩漬け肉に興味があった。日本の城を想起させる外観も近代的過ぎず良い。
	Good focus on craft gin, which is booming in Japan, and trying to make the business viable. 日本でもブームになっているクラフトジンに着目し経営を成り立たせようとしているのが良い。
	Good building form and expressions. 建物フォルム、表現良い。
	I thought the Japanese style was good. 和風で良いと思った。
	It's good that it has a Japanese feel. 日本感があっていい。
Student C	(I liked this project) because it is on the sea. 海の上にあるから。
	It seems fun to be on top of the sea. 海の上であって楽しそう。
	I can enjoy nature and thought it was great that it was built on the sea 自然を満喫でき、海の上に建てるのがすごいと思った。
	It is not hot, it seems cool. 暑くなく、涼しそう。
	It fits in with the landscape of Kamijima-town. 上島町の風景と合っている。
	Surrounded by the sea, I thought the design made it easy to feel the sea. 海に囲まれ、海を感じやすい設計だと思った。
	I had never paid much attention to the view when arriving by boat, but I thought it

	was wonderful to have this kind of view. 船から上陸する時の景色を気に入ったことがなかったけど、こういう目線って素敵だと思った。
	It is attractive to residents. 住居としても魅力的。
	The long pier is interesting. 長い栈橋が面白い。
	I can feel the presence of the sea. 海を感じるができる。
	It feels good to be in touch with the sea. 海にふれあえる感じが良い。
	It is good to have a dream. However, it is not realistic. But I like it. 夢があって良い。但し現実的ではない。でも好き。
	Good concept focusing on the relationship between land and sea. The best attraction of Kamijima is the scenery, so the concept of being able to experience both the sea and the mountains is good. 陸と海の関係に着目したコンセプトが良かった。上島の魅力は第一に景色だと思うので海山の両方を味わえるコンセプトが良い。
Student D	It makes good use of the characteristics of Kamijima Town, which is surrounded by the sea. 海に囲まれている上島町の特徴をうまく活かしている。
	I thought the idea of using seawater to regulate the temperature of the facilities was excellent. 海水を利用して施設の温度調整をするアイデアが素晴らしいと思った。
	Seafood is the main attraction. 海鮮をメインにしている。
	The play facilities with fish tanks and seafood market is good. 生簀がある遊べる施設や海鮮市場が良い。
	Appearance and ability to fish at the sea. 外観と海上で釣りができること。
	It looks cool. 見た目がカッコいい。
Student E	The idea of having a bioplastics research facility on site is excellent. バイオプラスチックの研究施設を併設するという発想は素晴らしいと思

	う。
	Small volumes and programme. 小さなボリュームとプログラム。
	It would be better to have a small volume and a facility to study the programme environment and a space for islanders to use. Thinking together about environmental issues. A place where tourists, islanders and researchers can interact. 環境を研究する施設と島民の利用できるスペースがあると尚良いと思う。環境問題についてみんなで考える。観光客の人、島民、研究者が交流する場。
	I thought it would be good if a new industry was created through the facility. 施設を通して、新しい産業が生まれると良いと思ったから。
	I'm not sure why but its good. I like it. なんだかい。好き。
Student F	I really like the idea of having natures inside the building. 建物内に自然があるのがめっちゃいい。
	I feel like the design is a bit too complex, but I think it's a good use of space if it doesn't overwhelm the surrounding nature. デザインは少し複雑過ぎる気もするが、周囲の自然を圧倒しなければスペースの使い方は良いと思う。
	It is similar to the image of the house we are going to build. これから作ろうとしているハウスのイメージと似ている。
Student G	Interesting design of the ceiling of the car park 駐車場の天井のデザインが面白い。
	Interesting design and proposed use of the building 建物のデザインと活用案が面白い。
	Because I felt a breeze that couldn't be seen from the building's appearance. 建築物の見た目からは見えない風を感じたから。
Student H	It is good to be able to move around by taking advantage of the boundaries. 境界線を活かし移動できるところがよい。
	The space can be adjusted. Because we can respond to changes in the times. It can be used for cafés, markets, and hotels. スペース/空間の調整がきく。時代の変化に対応できるから。カフェでも、市場でも、ホテルでもできる。

Student I	Interesting building design and proposed utilization. 建物のデザインと活用案が面白い。
Student J	The focus on craftspeople showed potential. If it can be a mechanism to bring the making of things and living closer together. 「職人」に着目している点に可能性を感じた。モノを作ることと暮らしを近づける仕組みになれば。

Questions 8:

Have you had any opportunities so far to express your opinions and requests about new projects and new initiatives in Kamijima Town? If you answered “yes,” what opportunities or occasions have you attended?

これまでに上島町の新事業や新しい取り組みについて、あなたのご意見やご要望を伝えられる機会がありましたか? 「はい」と答えた方は、どのような機会や場に参加されましたか?

Response	Exhibition #1	Exhibition #2	Total
Yes はい	12	0	12
No いいえ	37	9	46
Total	49	9	58

Responses from those who answered yes:

1	Initiatives to install rubbish bins in the sea (Junior High School on the island), Beach clean project 海にごみ箱を設置する取り組み(弓削中学校)、ビーチクリーンプロジェクト
2	Own PJ 自身 PJ
3	Talked to the town about the use of vacant houses 空き家活用について役場と話した
4	Islands Revitalization Cooperation team 島おこし協力隊
5	Kamijima town circular (economy) vision committee (2019–2020) 上島町循環型ビジョン策定委員会(2019-2020)
6	Council Meeting 協談会
7	<i>Machizukuri</i> (town development) meeting まちづくり懇談会
8	Maybe there was, but I didn't know about it and never participated in it. あったのかもしれないけど、知らず参加したことがない

Question 9:

Have you ever heard the term *machizukuri*? What does this term mean to you?

「まちづくり」という言葉を聞いたことはありますか。あなたにとってこの言葉が持つ意味は何ですか？

1	To make a town. まちをつくる。
2	To make a convenient town. 便利な町を構成していく。
3	Improving livability, not just appearance and convenience. 外観や便利さだけではなく住み易さを良くしていくこと。
4	Everyone makes the town. みんなが町をつくっていく。
5	Creating places where people can connect. Maintaining these places. 人と人がつながる場所をつくること。維持すること。
6	Various people can be involved along with the residents. 住民と共にいろんな人が関われる。
7	Revitalizing the town. 町の活性化。
8	Community. コミュニティー。
9	To add attraction in terms of hardware and software to the original good qualities of the area. 元からあるその土地の良さに、ハード・ソフト面でプラスの魅力を加えること。
10	To connect and revitalize the people within the town. To create a better environment for visitors by the people of the town. 町の中で人々がつながり活性化すること。町の人々によって町を訪れる人にとってより良い環境になること。
11	Development and protection. 発展と保護。
12	To create an environment where residents and visitors feel comfortable. 住む人、訪れる人が心地よく感じる場所づくり。
13	To create an <i>ibasho</i> (place of belonging) and <i>yohaku</i> (blank canvas) 居場所と余白づくり。

14	I believe that people's lives lead to the creation of the town. 人の生活がまちを作っていくことに繋がると思う。
15	Towns where people live lively lives. 住む人が生き生きと暮らすまち。
16	Locating subjectivity. 主体性の所在。
17	The word gives the impression of "environmental design." The image of the word is that of professionals who are aware of it and use it. I don't think it is a word that citizens are very aware of. 言葉のイメージは「環境デザイン」という印象を受ける。専門家の人々が意識を持ち使っているイメージ。市民レベルではあまり意識されていない言葉のような気がする。
18	Thinking about the future of the town in 10, 30 and 50 years. 10年後、30年後、50年後の町の未来を考えること。
19	To create a town where tourists, in-migrants and locals can work together. To create a town where the next generation of children will want to live. 観光客、移住者、地元民が一緒になってつくっていくこと。次世代の子供たちが暮らしたいと思える町を作ること。
20	Review of public finances in response to falling birthrates, aging and declining population. Measures to attract child-rearing and working generations. This will make the town more attractive. 少子高齢化、人口減少に対応した財政の見直し。子育て世代、働き世代を呼び込む施策。それが町の魅力化になる。
21	Aim to be more rooted in the community and not just a development. ただの開発に終わらず、地域により根差したものを目指すこと。
22	It gives the image of building things. And the image of costing money. ものを建てるイメージ。お金を使うイメージ。
23	Maintain and secure residents and population (impossible without business). 住人、人口を維持、確保すること（事業が無いと無理）。
24	Developing new tourist attractions. 新たな観光スポットの開発。
25	Creating places for people inside and outside the town to enjoy. 町内外の人に楽しんでもらえる場所を作ること。
26	It is not just about making things.

	モノづくりだけではない。
27	Liven up the town. 町を盛り上げる。
28	Exuding vitality. 活気が出る。
29	Good feeling, healthy. いいかんじ、元気。
30	Firstly, to create “people.” まずは「人」づくり。
31	Initiatives to increase tourism using the whole town. 町全体を使って観光客を増やす取り組み。

Question 10:

Has this exhibition increased your interest in Kamijima and your thoughts on the future of Kamijima?

今回の報告展によって、あなたの上島町に対する関心や上島町の将来に対する思いは高まりましたか？

Response	Exhibition #1	Exhibition #2	Total
Yes はい	51	12	63
No いいえ	1	1	2
I don't know 分からない	2	0	2
Total	54	13	67

Question 11:

Please feel free to provide any feedback or questions below about the exhibition.

ご自由に感想や質問があれば以下にご記入ください。

1	It was fun. 楽しかった。
2	There were many different facilities proposed, all of which were great. I thought all the facilities were good because they made use of nature. いろいろな施設の案があり、どれも素晴らしかった。どの施設も自然を活かしているので良いと思った。
3	There were a lot of great ideas, and I really enjoyed looking at them. 素敵な案が多くて、見ていてすごく楽しかった。素敵な案が多くて、見ていてすごく楽しかった。
4	It's exciting to see all these great ideas. とても素敵な案ばかりでわくわくしますね。
5	Student A's project poster was very easy to read. イーランさんのポスターがとても見やすかった。
6	It was a very good project. We hope it will materialize. とても良い企画だった。具体化することを期待している。
7	It was a very great project! I really want to see one of these projects built as a roadside station! とても素晴らしい企画でした!本当にこの中から道の駅を作ってほしいです!
8	I enjoyed seeing all the unique ideas. 個性のあるアイデアばかりで見ていて楽しかった。
9	I was happy to see so many beautiful designs. It gave me a lot of pleasure to imagine how the scenery I see in my daily life will change in the future. Thank you very much. とても美しいデザインをたくさん見ることができて嬉しかったです。暮らしの中で目にする景色が、これから先どんなふうに変化していくのか想像しながらイメージしながら生活することができればと、とても楽しみが増えました。どうもありがとうございました。
10	I thought they were all designed with the future in mind for the town's people and tourists. I want a roadside station to be built in Kamijima town. I want to build it!

	どれも町の人、観光客のことをよく考えた未来がある設計だと思った。上島町に道の駅を作ってほしい。作りたい!
11	It was good to learn about the architectural thinking of foreign students. It would be good if such cultural exhibitions and events were held more frequently in the future. 外国の学生の建築的考え方を知れて良かった。これからもこのような文化的な展示やイベントが頻繁に実施されると良い。
12	Once again, I was reminded that Nancy is an impressive person. Thanks for the interesting exhibition! 改めてナンシーさんが凄い人だったんだと思い知らされた。興味深い展示をどうもありがとう!
13	We are glad as townspeople that you are taking the island seriously, a place you have never visited. I would love for everyone to come and visit us once the corona is over. 訪れたことの無い土地、島のことを真剣に考えていただいて町民として嬉しいです。コロナが収まったら是非みなさんに遊びに来てもらいたいです。
14	I would love to see the roadside station become a reality. 是非道の駅を実現してほしいです。
15	The students had a lot of interesting ideas. 学生の皆さんのアイデアが面白いものばかりだった。
16	I thought the people were warm and welcoming on the island. It was an island where I could relax and want to come back. 人が温かい島だと思った。ゆったりできてまた来たいと思える島だった。
17	I would like Kamijima Town to be developed while retaining its current charm. 上島町の今の魅力を残したまままちづくりをしてほしいと思う。
18	Borrow the wisdom and strength from outside (of the town). 外部の知恵、力を借りる。
19	I'm glad that the Sea Station (the public facility the exhibition is held in) has been given a new use as a place for exhibitions like this. ふらっとがこのような展示の場所として新しい活用が生まれ、嬉しく感じる。
20	I thought it was a very good initiative. I really want you to come and do some research once the coronavirus subsides. とても良い取り組みだと思った。コロナが収まったらぜひ本当にリサーチしに来てほしい。
21	I think it's a great project design. I hope it becomes a reality.

	素晴らしい企画デザインだと思います。実現すればいいですね。
22	I would like to see more emphasis on experiences that take advantage of the island's nature and scenery, rather than focusing on boxy things. 箱物重視ではなく、島の自然や景観を活かした体験を重視してほしい。
23	Rather than building new buildings, it would be better if we could make use of what we have. It would be good if town planning could make use of crumbling old houses. I think the town could be transformed by making use of the scattered vacant houses to create facilities such as island-wide co-living, where islanders and tourists can naturally interact, and by attracting remote workers and digital nomads. I think it will make the islanders livelier. 新しく建物を建てるよりは、今あるものを活用出来たらと思う。崩れ行く古民家を活かしたまちづくりができると良い。点在する空き家を活かして、島まるごとコリビングのような、島民と観光客が自然と交流できる「施設」、リモートワーカー、デジタルノマドを誘致して交流が生まれたら町は変わると思う。島の人もより生き生きすると思う。
24	In the near future, it would be good if 3D printers could be used to build the housing and disaster shelters needed in towns. In the meantime, I would like to see a shelter on top of a mountain where elderly people can go in the event of a disaster. 近い将来、3Dプリンターを使って町に必要な住宅や災害時のシェルターなどを作れるようになったら良いと思う。とりあえず山の上に災害時に高齢者も行ける避難所がほしい。
25	I would like to see a design that is more environmentally friendly and self-sufficient. より環境を考慮し自給自足できるデザインを見てみたい。
26	I want to live here in the future! 将来ここに住みたい!
27	Please do your best! 頑張ってください!
28	Creating an environment where people can ask themselves questions while developing themselves through learning how people, goods and money will flow in the future, and where they can fit into a network. これからの人、物、お金などの流れ方の学習などを通して、自己啓発をしながら今の自分に自問ができる環境づくり、ネットワークになじめる環境。

29	Too much text in the exhibition. Too small. Too many photos making it difficult to see. 展示の文字が多すぎる。小さすぎる。写真も多すぎて見えづらい。
30	Isn't it necessary to attract enough customers to cover maintenance costs? 維持費を賄うことができるだけの集客人数が必要では？
31	It's strange that people from overseas are interested in this island. I am very grateful to the graduate students who participated in this exhibition online. 不思議なくらい海外から来られた人々が弓削を気に入ってくれてます。今回の展示もオンラインでされた院生たち、すごく有難いです。
32	Too much taxpayers' money is spent. I don't think it is from the perspective of the townspeople and residents. 税金を使いすぎ。町民、住民の目線ではない気がする。
33	There is no need for "things." 物はいらない。