

Rethinking Japanese Inner-city Housing Towards the Future : Re-discovery & Re-invention

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1. Introduction

Recently, Japanese society has been having difficulty sustaining urban population due to various social changes – in particular because of the aging society and the long years of economic slump. The housing stock in Japan, wooden & low-rise houses present relatively large volume inner city, despite they are falling into be abundant or superannuated situation. Arguably, houses in inner-city is merely recognized as a potential housing stocks during the past decades, while the people competitively concentrate to invest to their ‘new world’ – modern estate housing.

For the sake of future housing policy formation and commitment, it is a matter of the utmost urgency that these inner-city housing stocks be salvaged and managed. This is related to potential economic recovery measures because of Japan’s highly land-value-oriented economy. It will also help to maintain traditional Japanese culture that has historically been incubated by urban society.

Housing issues in inner city areas have long since been affected by various complicated issues, such as physical improvement and socio-cultural factors. Understanding residents’ psychological factors is also important in order to utilize inner-city housing stock. This should be attended to urgently in order to attract more Japanese to live in cities.

Interestingly enough however, recently, especially among the younger generation, many Japanese have shown they are interested in living in traditional housing as place to live; yet the people themselves have continued to be transformed by the ultra-hi-tech nature of modern society in the Far East. They are now slowly re-discovering traditional Japanese values and re-inventing their way of life, producing a society where traditional and contemporary culture are mixed together.

It is clear that society needs to adjustment in various ways to sustain the inner city population, and utilize the ‘forgotten’ stocks to create a futuristic urban housing scenario.

This paper also intends to discuss possible scenarios for utilizing existing housing stocks for the future Japanese urban community. The intention, of course, is to provide and propose new approaches for suitable housing for the 21st century.

2. Toward Japanese Urban Renaissance; New Agendas of Japanese Inner-city Housing

This paper intends to present and analyze contemporary issues of Japanese inner city housing as well as measures for urban revitalization. Nowadays, Japanese society is experiencing drastic, but silent social changes which it has never ever experienced before. Japanese society has been having difficulty in sustaining urban population amidst these various social changes.

In Japan, traditionally, the city expands from traditional settlements to urban suburbs. Historically, cities were formed from small hamlets to bigger settlements and these became the core in many cities¹. However, these historic cores were destroyed during World War Two, and after the war huge amounts of *mokuchin jutaku* – rental based houses with wooden structures (lower quality housing stock that reflects a large housing demand²). This research targets to argue these settlement and built type as inner city housing stock.

During periods of high economic growth, Japanese targeted their housing development in suburban areas under joint projects by various sectors– e.g.: railway, housing, manufacturers, etc. However, inner city areas still exist where in most of the settlements infrastructure – e.g.: proper road access, sewage systems, fire prevention or public facilities – has not been improved, despite the fact that the government spent a huge amount to improve these areas through the processes of urban redevelopment projects³.

In terms of future housing policy formation and commitment, it is essential that these inner-city housing stocks be salvaged and managed. Furthermore, this will be related to potential economic recovery measures under Japan’s highly land-value-oriented economy.

Fig 1. Typical Urban Housing in inner city areas of Tokyo –high density with disorder
(Left: traditional house, Center: Urban area, Right: typical public housing)



(Photograph: author)

¹ Akira Koshizawa, 1991, *Toukyouno Toshikeikaku, Urban Planning in Tokyo*, Iwanami

² Uzou Nishiyama, 1975, *Nihon no Sumai 1-3, House in Japan 1-3*, Keisou

³ Yorifusa Ishida, 1987, *Nihon kindai toshikeikaku no hyakunen, An experience of Japanese Modern Urban Planning*, Zichitai Kenkyu Sya

Arguably, there are three major factors that should be argued as new agendas of Japanese inner city housing; facing aging society, the long years of economic slump, and complicated land ownership.

Firstly, Japanese society faces remarkable demographic aging trends. This demographic pattern change is one of the most important factors that have caused lower investment in real estate property. Now, the older generation (65 years old and over, according by Japanese government statistics) constitutes 17% of Japan's total population, and the younger population is also continually decreasing due to the decreasing birth rate. In 2050, the ageing rate will be 32% or higher⁴. It is said that this will be a critical time for maintaining social vitality as well as economic stability⁵. Recent Government reports⁶ cite that the population decrease may cause future economic recession. Furthermore, in an aging society such as Japan's, a large percentage of the budget is needed to maintain present social welfare policies and to upgrade urban infrastructures in order to cope. These trends may cause changes in settlement patterns. Remarkable social aging trends have been observed in old quarters, especially in the countryside and inner city areas.

Secondly, the long years of Japan's recent economic slump have forced urban restructuring that has included housing and population patterns. Furthermore, urban land values have dropped drastically, and some major urban centers have experienced a nearly 50% drop in land values since the time of the 'Bubble Economy'⁷. However, in the current economic situation, domestic real estate demands are relatively lower than in past decades. Also, most of economic indexes are indicating lower potential, as is real estate investment, especially on urban real estate markets. Despite these lower land prices, there are no development demands or potential inner city. This is also a reason to loose urban redevelopment projects to accommodate more population in Japanese inner cities.

Thirdly, Japanese land ownership is very supportive of the principal of free holding. And property legislation has been effective in securing the rights of land ownership and tenancy. In general, inner city housing stocks are bound by really complicated owner-renter relationships, and so planners and authorities have to spend lots of time and money to reach agreements. Urban redevelopment processes must overcome many "obstacles", in order to foster development, which consist of long negotiation periods and higher costs in order to deal with stakeholders and/or tenants. As a result, most Japanese urban areas are of lower population density than her Asian counterparts. These inner city areas are predominantly occupied by wooden and lower density housing, and sometimes the building conditions are still the same as those built during the building rush immediately after World War Two⁸.

Arguably, it is a reason that housing stock in Japan, wooden & low-rise houses are still existed, and present relatively large volume inner city, despite they are falling into be abundant or superannuated situation⁹.

⁴ The Institute for Population Studies, Population Census, 2001

⁵ Satake Hiroaki, et.al, 1990, *Koureika syakai heno sougou seisaku, Comprehensive policy towards aging society*, Shinhyouron

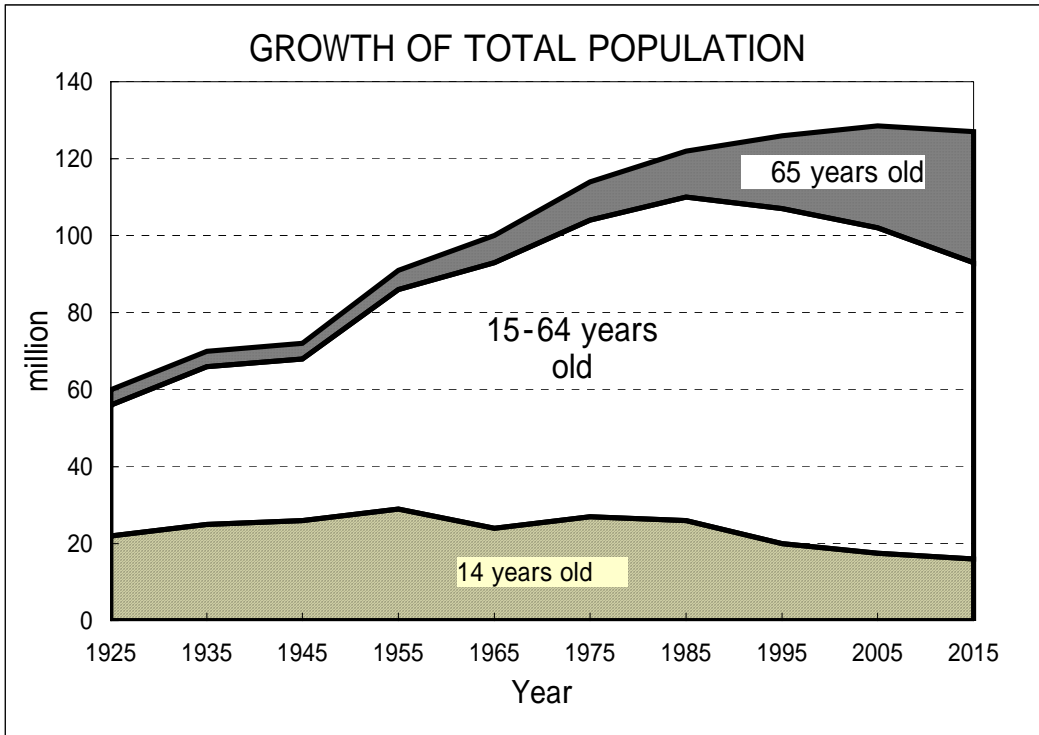
⁶ Japanese Government, Economic Report, 2003 October

⁷ Japanese Government, Real Estate Index 2000-2001, 2002

⁸ 1985, *Roukyu Mokuchin zyutaku kyozyuusya chousa, A survey on old wooden rental house*, Nihon jyutakusougou center

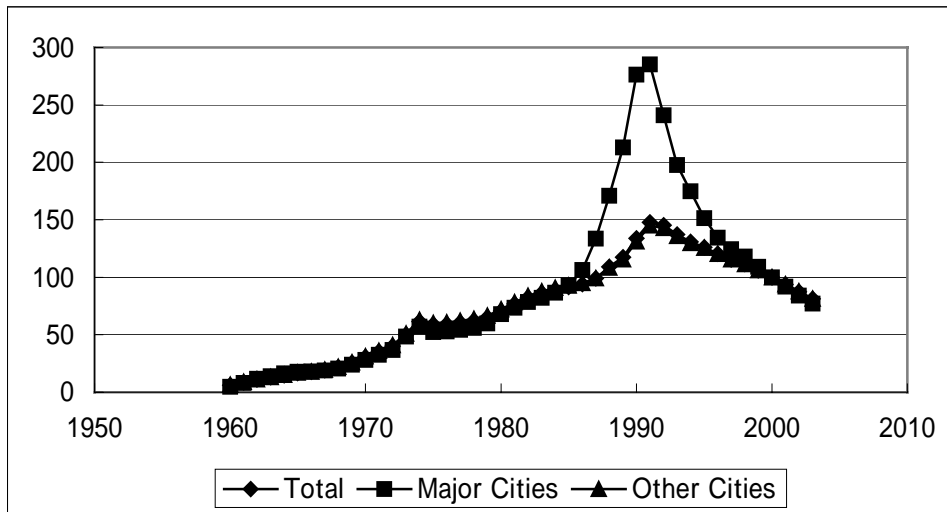
⁹ Hiroshi Mimura, 1986, *Sumaigaku no Susume*, Gakugei

Fig 2 Aging trends in Japan from 1925 to the present, and estimations to 2015



Source: Statistical Survey Department, Statistics Bureau,
Ministry of Public Management, Home Affairs, Posts and Telecommunications

Fig.3 Japanese Land Price index, from 1950 to 2003 (End of March 2000=100)



Major cities refer to *Ku* (district area) of Tokyo, Yokohama, Nagoya, Kyoto, Osaka and Kobe.
Source: The Japan Real Estate Institute

3. The Phenomenon of “Shutter Street”; Expanding Suburbs and Forgotten Urban Centers

Inner-city housing has only really been recognized as potential housing stock during the past decades, as people have competitively concentrated on investing in the ‘new world’ of modern estate housing.

Following this social transformation, many shops have closed down due to the economic slump, the decreasing population or the phenomenon of the aging society. The “Shutter Street” is found in most Japanese urban centers.

In typical a case of ‘Shutter Street’ in western Japan, most shops are closed and so too are their ‘shutter’s. In days gone by, these areas were potential commercial centers of the province, and most shop owners resided upstairs from their shop. However, Japanese social transformation as well as motorization and mega shopping complex developments have taken over customers away from the old shopping street. These areas are now facing new urban problems, including worthier urban security.

Practical revitalization measures and policies are being implemented to salvage these commercial activities inner city. However, some shop owners are not motivated enough, because most house volumes have completely depreciated, and most owners have already become senior citizens and have no business successors¹⁰.

Fig. 4 A shutter street in western Japan
(Left: Abandoned Former Bank Building, Left: Closed shoe shop)



(Photograph: author)

Similarly, the urban population has helped to maintain Japanese traditional culture that has been incubated on urban society historically¹¹. However, recent social changes have caused cultural transformation as well as disappearing of original socio-cultural norms, despite the fact that the Japanese government has implemented several revitalization measures that were to help urban communities and small retailers.

These days in Japanese inner cities one can observe many abandoned and empty buildings that cannot be used for anything. Following fig.5 shows the case of an inner city. This town has a population of thirty thousand, and is located in western Japan. Over 30% of the houses in this town are empty. However, 35% of the occupied houses are occupied by a single elderly person or an elderly couple.

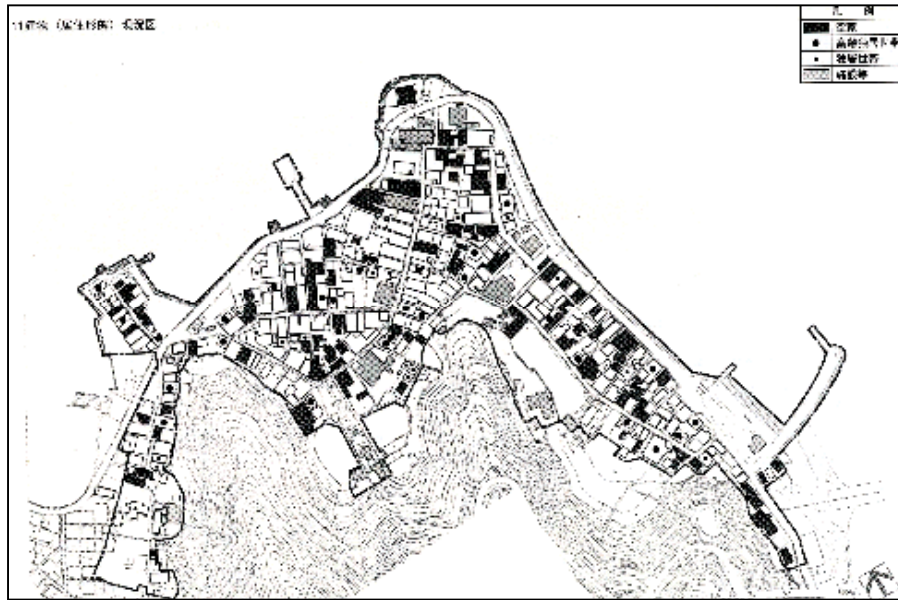
¹⁰ Maeda Susumu, 1999, *Tyuushin shigaiti shoutengai no katuru, gyousei*

¹¹ Yukio Nishimura, 1997, *Kankyō Hozen to Keikan Souzou (Environmental Conservation and Creating new Landscape)*, Kashima Co. (In Japanese)

Also, this town's location is very isolated because it is not linked by railway to any larger city. Therefore, most of the younger inhabitants have moved from this, their hometown, to suburbs of bigger cities. This tendency is observed in many major Japanese cities.

Fig 5. A case of “empty” town in western Japan

Empty houses are colored in black, and houses inhabited by a single elderly person are marked with a black dot.



Source: Yushi Utaka 1999

However on the other hand, some suburban housing estates have suffered drastic population decreases similar to those in inner-city areas. Communities living on estates tend to share similar socio-economical characteristics – such as social class, family structure, income or educational level – that we could define as a “housing class”¹². This similarity in socio-economic characteristics reflects the its fast aging trend, because most housing estates were developed at once by the same developer. Therefore, these estates clearly indicate the aging trend of the population.

Furthermore, the phenomena of ‘scrap & build’ and short building life are commonly observed on the housing estates. Government statistics¹³ showing that the average Japanese building-life is less than 28 years. This trend is expected to become shorter year by year, especially on estate housing. These shorter building-life cases share similar problems – lower physical quality of building, commercial image on housing market, inadaptability for barrier free facilities or poor maintenance, sometimes, when compared with old housing stock of inner city. Japanese estate housing also appears to be following the same trends that have been experienced in inner city areas.

¹² Fukuhara Masahiro, 2001, *Yomigaere New town*, Kokon

¹³ Source: The Japan Real Estate Institute

4. Cultural & Psychological Barriers toward Re-use

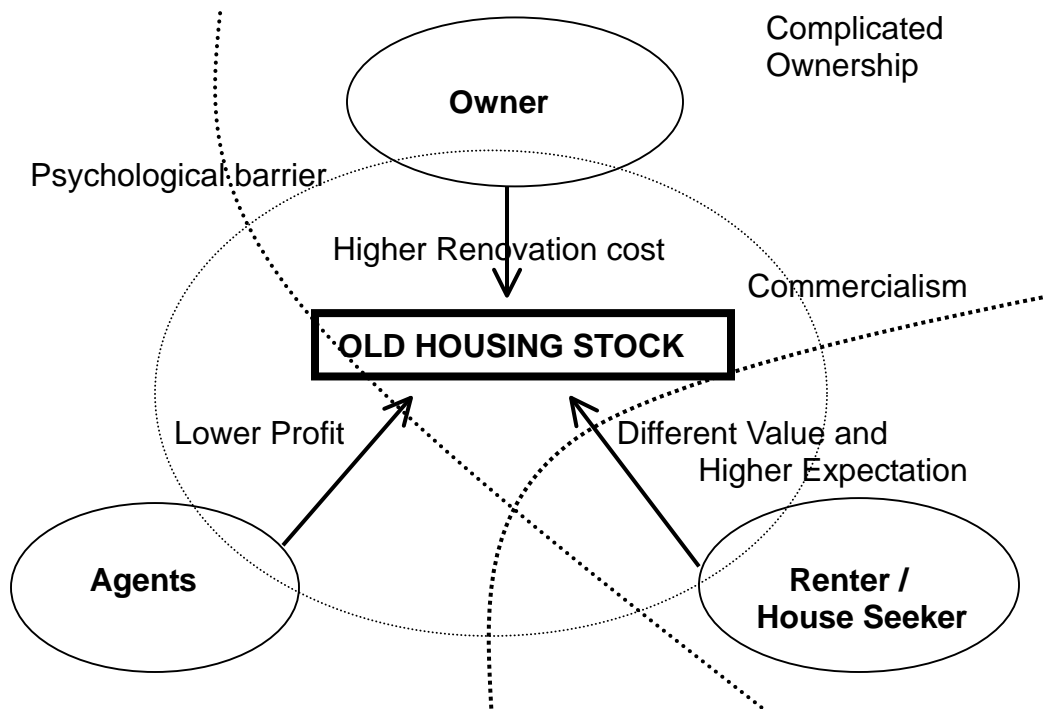
Housing re-use in inner city areas has come into contact with various complicated issues, such as physical improvement or socio-cultural factors. Similarly, resident's psychological factors are also important when seeking to utilize inner-city housing stock. This needs to be adjusted urgently in order to attract more contemporary Japanese urbanites.

Contemporary Japanese housing is no exception when it comes to modern industrial housing; high-energy consumption and factory-assembled houses are common. Cultural transformation, especially among the younger generation, is also a factor, as many younger people desire to live in traditional houses. Occupiers in traditional houses, sometimes they have to share bath or kitchen facilities.

Arguably, there are 6 factors that would be determined as cultural and psychological barriers to the re-use of old housing stock.

- 1) **Complicated Ownership:** Too much complicated housing – owner / renter ship
- 2) **Poor Facilities:** Differences between the housing conditions and the contemporary house seeker's needs
- 3) **Higher Cost:** Higher cost of maintenance, renovation and property tax for old housing stocks
- 4) **Poor Market Response:** Negative evaluation by real estate market as a rental properties
- 5) **Relation with Neighbors:** Human relation in traditional settlements
- 6) **Commercialism:** Dominance of commercial image on modern suburban housing

Fig 6. Barriers to Fostering Housing Re-use



Generally, these psychological barriers are related to each other and the appearance of some of them depends very much on the case. The following cases contain complicated issues that represent difficulties related to in housing re-use.

[Case 1] A case of complicated ownership

This case is a house that was built in the early 1920's for residence – cum - Japanese *Sake* (rice wine) brewing. Recently, local authorities have introduced an urban redevelopment plan that intends to build new business quarters near this house. The landlord request to building user (tenant for land) to vacate this land for further commercial projects, that initially intend to turn the traditional building into a Japanese restaurant. However, this traditional house is evaluated as having a lower property value compared to the higher land asset tax that was reflected by the authority's development proposal. Also, this building is mortgaged through a bank loan to the *Sake* company. Eventually, the traditional building is scrapped, and the building owner moves his *Sake* Brewery to industrial estate. However, the house tenant complained about the decision of the building owner and the landlord.

[Case 2] A case of relation with neighbors

An owner intends to rent out his 50 year old empty house for house seekers, because he thinks that he could earn at least the same amount as his property tax from the rental. However, he is the first among his neighbors who intends to rent his property out, even though there are a lot of empty houses in the area. Eventually, he decides to scrap his house to use his land as a parking lot that will “serve” his neighbor. (He is waiting for the authorities permission for further commercial development, and for his neighbor to change his mind).

[Case 3] A case rejected a lifestyle of new comer / residents in traditional quarters

A young house seeking couple is looking for an inner city house, because they work in the inner city and they want to reduce their traveling time to/from their offices. Also the husband is interested in occupying a traditional house. However, their life style was criticized by neighbors, because they are unable to join any community activities; e.g. the regular cleaning of the drains or the community festival etc. Eventually, the landlord was pressured by community members to make the couple vacate this house and keep it as a vacant house or alternatively invite one of his relatives to occupy it.

5. Re-discovery & Re-invention; Returning to Tradition in the City

Despite these symptoms, recently, interestingly enough, many among the young generation have shown interested in living in traditional housing, even though the people themselves have been transforming in one of the most ultra-hi-tech modern societies in the world. ‘Returning to tradition’ is an important keyword to understand or forecast future Japanese society, while people struggle to rebuild Japan’s economy. They are now slowly re-discovering traditional values, re-inventing their way of life, and creating a mixture of traditional and contemporary society/culture.

Now in Japan, many retired *Japanese salary men* (middle class white collar workers) are moving from their houses in housing estates to farmhouses or traditional town houses.

This trend is not limited only to the senior generation. Even many among the younger generation of urbanities are trying to find their new place in traditional settlements, even if thereby they would be unable to enjoy modern living facilities; hot baths, round the clock security service, parking lots, or high speed internet access, etc.

For example, in the ancient city of Kyoto in western Japan, former traditional *Kimono* (traditional ware) craftsman’s workshops are being converted for various uses – artist’s workshops, housing for young couples, or cafés. All of them are re-discovering the significance of this architectural heritage, even though they have had to make a lot of adjustments since they are used to conventional modern Japanese lifestyle. Some of more adventurous occupants are re-inventing their way of life in this way.

Of course, in Kyoto, before they started this project, there were lots of hurdles to clear to establish bridges between owners and renters. Community organizations, NGOs, and local government have been collaborating to establish new ideas, such as business incubation, community workstations, information centers for visitors, and galleries etc. It is said that these trials should be understood as pioneers of counter action for effective urban revitalization, although the majority of cities are as yet far from revitalizing and activating their communities.

Fig. 7 Community Initiative of re-using traditional housing; A case in western Japan
(Left: An old town house converted into a gallery, Right: its entrance)



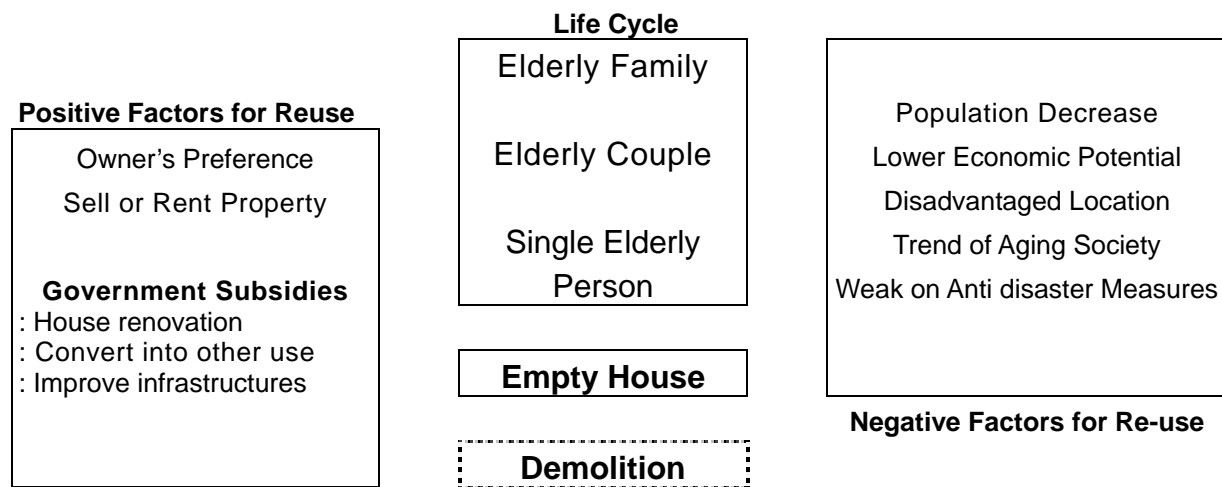
6. Concluding Remarks: Towards Japanese Urban Renaissance

Towards Urban Revitalization: Life cycle & Measures

The Japanese government is now implementing measures for urban revitalization. For example, “The Policy for Revitalization Measures in Inner-cities” was implemented in 1998, and this intends to implement comprehensive measures to revitalize inner city areas. Previously, in Japan, conventional ‘Scrap & Build’ type physical development approaches were popularly implemented in urban redevelopment projects. However, recent revitalization policies have been enhancing local participatory approaches and commitment to urban renaissance. This is expected to revitalize not only commercial activities, but also urban communities as a whole.

There are some practical measures that might be able to maintain urban population, culture and commercial potential in Japanese cities. The following diagram shows the relation of this with family structure and its life cycle. Surrounding this vertical frame, there are two streams toward housing re-use as well as revitalization measures.

Fig. 8 Towards a theory of urban revitalization and recovery measures



Yushi Utaka, 1997, *New Agendas of Japanese Heritage Conservation*, Asian Real Estate Society

For Japanese urban renaissance, it is clear that society needs various adjustments to sustain the inner city population, and utilize these ‘forgotten’ stocks in order to create the nation’s future urban housing scenario. However, Japanese society is facing many new challenges. Required future policies for urban renaissance in Japan will be implemented not only with regards to physical maintenance or upgrades in physical aspects of conventional urban housing, but also to maintain and adjust the relationship between tradition and modernity in order to create a better future society.

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