Housing LIN
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Case Study 184

Beyond the Care Home: What Japan can teach us about intergenerational approaches to later living

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Written for the Housing Learning and Improvement Network by **Siri Zanelli**, Architect and Founding Partner at Collective Works



Background

Siri Zanelli, Architect at Collective Works recently returned from a research trip to Japan, where she visited elderly care facilities that bring the generations together and bring purpose and community to those that use them.

Introduction

It was natural to return to Japan for this research; in the early 2000s I completed my Masters of Architecture on innovative mini houses in Tokyo - and I remain fascinated by the city's ability to embrace change, experiment architecturally and fearlessly challenge the way we live. The urban context forces the challenging of established ideas, the city has been erased enough times to accept new thinking in a way that is distant for us in the west, but at the same time there is a delicate and respectful cultural relationship with nature, seasons, and the seasons of life. I wanted to return to see whether this spirit of innovation and care could offer lessons for the questions we are trying to answer in the UK.

Our population is ageing. There are over 1.75 million people aged 85 and over in the UK as of mid-2024, representing 2.5% of the population. This figure is projected to double by 2049. These demographic shifts raise urgent questions about the suitability of existing housing typologies and strategies for care provision currently available for later life.



Above: Long House With Engawa
Cover: Kasugadai Center Center

But this circumstance is not unique to the UK. Japan has been a super-aged society (over 21% of the population is 65+) since the beginning of the millennium, and the UK is expected to cross this threshold within the next ten years. This demographic shift should be the focus when we plan housing and communities. Sponsored by the Norwegian Sasakawa Foundation, I took a research trip to Japan - to look at best practice in housing for the elderly.

I visited three examples of elderly care homes, from day care to dementia care and a mix. What I was struck by was not room size, technological solutions, or daylight factor, but the careful overlap of functions, intergenerational placemaking and a reassessment of who is the caregiver, and who is being cared for. These were places shaped around giving residents and users independence, confidence and community. In doing this, each one also reached out into the wider community bringing intergenerational benefits.

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Ginmokusei Centre

By Silver Wood Co Ltd

Ginmokusei is a privately owned care centre in Kanagawa, providing housing for 55 elderly people with need for full time care, many with dementia. The owner and founder deliberately wanted to create a care home that he would like to live in himself.

On arrival, we are met by a nobori: a vertical flag showing the name of a business printed on fabric, swaying in the wind with the same rhythm as the pine trees along the linear park that lines the front street. It doesn't feel like a care facility.

Fronting onto the street is a sweet shop. This narrow street facing space, filled with traditional sweets, backs onto the entrance lobby and acts as a welcoming window to the street. There are three elementary schools nearby, and the shop is open around the school run making an everyday connection between the local community and the elderly, less mobile, residents.





The sweet shop is a functional representation of the idea of freedom. At Ginmokusei the entrance door is open, the residents can leave or have visitors as they wish, and the common areas are open to the community. In the candy shop, they are given the freedom to do some work, and get to know the neighbours. Residents are encouraged to participate in the running of the home, and the sweet shop. When we spoke with the manager it was clear that the joy and purpose the shop brings to the residents outweighs the odd pricing mistakes when the kids get a good deal on their candy haul due to the shopkeepers' slowly declining cognitive function.



The inclusion of an everyday function into the street facing entrance acts as a catalyst for neighbourhood inclusion and belonging. It creates joy, erases the notion of who is being cared for, and makes the care home a vibrant part of an unassuming neighbourhood street in the suburbs of Tokyo. This is a model that is proving successful and there are now a dozen Ginmokusei facilities in Japan.

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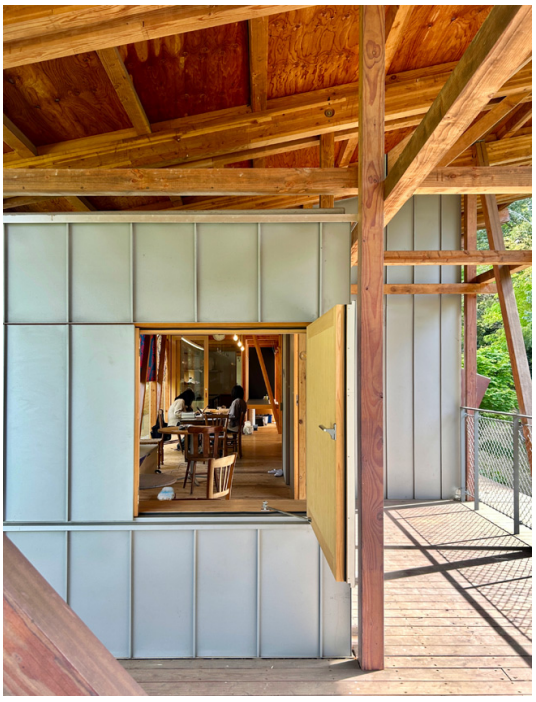
Long House With Engawa

By Yamazaki Kentaro Design Workshop

Long House With Engawa is a day-care centre for the elderly and a community hub located on the outskirts of a bamboo forest in Chiba prefecture. Built on a narrow site, the physical openness of the timber structure reflects the programme within.



When I visit, the head of the day care centre emerges from the bamboo grove, where she has been harvesting bamboo shoots, to greet us. The two little girls who had accompanied her melt away. They go to play in the garden, tease the goat, sit and draw in the communal kitchen and hang out in the grounds, while their mothers work with the elderly.



The founder had a fundamental idea that he wanted to create a facility without rules, rigid boundaries or hierarchy. Breaking down the notion of the staff as providers and the elderly as receivers of help, was intentional and can be seen in the lack of uniforms and signage. The open timber structure does not in any way resemble a care facility - the building is a long terrace with open walkways facing the bamboo forest and overlooking a small pond. The flexible spaces are

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open and light, extroverted and nature facing: it is open to the forest, welcoming the meanderings of a goat and some cats. Birdsong and rustling of leaves is a constant in the background. The terrace is a place for contemplation, chatting, outside cooking and socialising and there is no schedule or timetable other than the rhythm of the day.

As well as the regular day visitors who suffer from a varying degree of mobility and dementia issues, the Long House is open to anyone that needs it: people out of work, those seeking training, children, adults, anyone in need of a community. The opening of a community cafe was in progress - the final step in fully blurring the boundaries between community and care facilities. I left with a feeling of calm joy; I sensed it was a place where both the staff and the users of the daycare centre feel they belong.

Kasugadai Center Center

By Teco Architects

The final visit, to the Kasugadai Center Center in Kanagawa prefecture, was an eye opening example of delivering welfare through a community building where multiple functions overlap.

The former Kasugadai Center was a supermarket on the main square of the town. It shut down, and the area lost its anchor. The new Kasugadai Center Center took on the site, the name, and the responsibility of creating a hub on the town's main square.







The purpose of the Centre was developed over several years through consultation and co-creation with the local community. It provides housing for 18 dementia patients and daycare for up to 25 elderly people, alongside an after school club and homework space, space to deliver Japanese lessons for the local immigrant community, a coin laundry and dry cleaners and a snack bar. A street facing kiosk acts as a reception for the Center. Within these services, it also provides both employment and vocational training for locals with special needs.

I saw local school children using the daycare facility's front room as a place to hang out after school, play on their phones and do homework - height differences and movable partitions demarcate boundaries between circulation and programme, gently supporting interactions across generations.

The kiosk becomes a meeting place, a point of information exchange between all the facilities and a classic "eye on the square" for all the children who ride bikes in the square, visitors to the care centre and people dropping off their laundry. This is much more than a care home; it is a community centre with intergenerational welfare at its core.



Imagine if...

Back in the UK, these projects have stayed with me.

They don't categorise neatly as 'care homes' or 'community centres'. Instead, they have broken out of the siloed way services are delivered in the UK.

I imagine what the outcomes would have been if, for example, the outdoor spaces we reinvigorated at Highgate Primary and Chestnuts Nursery were open out of school hours to the public, perhaps also available as social prescribing resources, to connect people over the weeding and planting.

What if the later living Almshouses we did a feasibility study for recently also included a community centre, a nursery school or an events space so everyone could enjoy the gardens and make new connections?

By diversifying the programme of our social care buildings, do we also show a truer reflection of what our communities could be? More connected, more social, healthier.

More than care for older people

The looming elderly care crisis, if seen through a different lens could be the opportunity we need to tackle a broader range of issues around care, wellbeing and societal norms. The benefits are multiple: generating intergenerational respect and relationships; creating third spaces where independence, purpose and confidence can be nurtured; tackling loneliness and taking the pressure off the health service; putting people-centred services back in the hearts of our towns and villages.

The buildings that house these three examples are diverse, but they are all purpose built so the layouts, materiality, degree of openness and flexibility can support the programme; all have strong architecture that speaks to the ethos of each place. Importantly, each project took the time to connect and consult with locals to understand their needs, resulting in places that encourage communication, flexibility and kindness.

Housing and care facilities for older people can take many shapes - these care facilities show that they should not exist in a silo. Planning for an ageing population is an opportunity to create community cohesion, to explore the co-benefits of mixing unexpected functions, and to build more care into our communities.

Note

The views expressed in this paper are those of the author and not necessarily those of the Housing Learning and Improvement Network.

Photographs by kind permission of the author.

About Collective Works

Collective Works is an architecture & design studio based in East London. Alasdair, Siri and Khuzema founded the studio with the ambition to design beautiful spaces and buildings with an awareness of our responsibility to the planet, society and each other. We practice building with care.

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About the Housing LIN

The Housing LIN is a sophisticated network bringing together over 15,000 housing, health and social care professionals in England, Wales and Scotland to exemplify innovative housing solutions for an ageing population. Recognised by government and industry as a leading 'ideas lab' on specialist/supported housing, our online and regional networked activities, and consultancy services:

- connect people, ideas and resources to inform and improve the range of housing that enables older and disabled people to live independently
- provide access to intelligence on the latest funding, research, policy and practice developments
- raise the profile of specialist and supported housing with developers, commissioners and operators, and
- attract business to help and support clients plan, design and operate aspirational housing and services for people of all ages.

If you found this Case Study of interest, the Housing LIN curates dedicated webpages on intergenerational housing at:
https://www.housinglin.org.uk/Topics/browse/Housing/HousingforOlderPeople/intergenerational-housing/

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