



Japan: Where grassroots support initiatives are growing in empty houses

Japan has the fastest ageing society where a significant 25% are now aged 65-plus, that means 1 in 4 of its 127 million population. Within a decade, it is envisaged that Japan's 65-plus population will exceed 30%.

With so many over-65s living independently there are those who need – or will soon need – differentiated levels of care and support. This is placing a strain on the resources of a country running the world's highest level of debt – 242% of Japan's GDP – and so the search is underway for cost-effective, innovative and sustainable solutions to deliver these levels of care and support. In this context, the voluntary sector is seeking to augment and add value to stretched public care provision.

This case study for the Housing Learning and Improvement Network sets out how Japan is addressing these issues. Parallels can be drawn with the pressures facing public services and new approaches which could be developed or deployed in the UK to provide a better range of age-friendly housing and community space for our ageing population.

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Introduction

There has been an acceleration in the number of older people living alone, as reflected in the recent survey in Japan which shows that in 1980 4.3% of men and 11.2% of women aged over 65 lived alone; by 2010 these figures had increased to 11.1% (men) and 20.3% (women). In Tokyo, the figure reached 23.6% while, nationally, the total number of the over-65s living alone is now almost 5 million, of these, 28% have no children.

Many in this population profile will be leading potentially isolated lives – and so may benefit from access to social spaces and opportunities for contact, socialisation and levels of care and support to reduce their isolation. Evidence of examples of increasing isolation is as poignant as it is persuasive. In 2009, 41.2% of men aged 65-plus (living alone) held only one conversation every 72 hours with 11.8% holding a conversation once a week.

In addition to the pressure from older people living alone, and in isolation, there are other groups within the ageing profile such as the increasing number of elderly carers living with and looking after their vulnerable elderly family members – who themselves will require care and support. For example, over 70% of Japanese informal carers (both male and female) are aged 60-plus with 19% of male carers aged 80-plus and 10% of female carers aged 80-plus.

Clearly, these elderly carers themselves require support in considerable measure, especially as they grow increasingly frail, potentially isolated – or indeed vulnerable to the early stages of dementia. The phenomenon of elderly carers living with – and looking after – other elderly relatives has become so established that the Japanese have coined specific terms for this: ‘*Ro-ro-Kaigo*’ refers to the elderly looking after the frail elderly and furthermore the recent term ‘*Nin-nin-Kaigo*’ refers to where the older relative with early-stage dementia is caring for a relative with dementia – currently, Japan has an estimated 5 million people with dementia.

Who are those with the answers?

Responding to these increasing needs from various groups within the ageing population, government – both central and local – have sought to promote the creation of informal ‘social spaces’ within the overall framework of ‘*Ibasho*’ (closest translation: ‘... a space where you can feel like yourself...’ i.e. feel inconspicuous, valued and at ease). Mainly conceived, developed and delivered by grassroots volunteers, these *Ibasho* inspired initiatives are distinctive and diverse.

Ibasho carries core values, goals and principles which were exemplified in a range of community ‘social space’ opportunities. Older people were valued as assets; local participation was paramount; the value of ageing was explored and reinforced – as was the integration of older people into the wider community – demarginalisation. Normalcy was at the heart of the initiative: reflected in the creation of informal gathering places to ‘embrace imperfections’. One definition of *Ibasho* states:

Ibasho believes in [providing] places of normalcy where elders can pop in at any time at their leisure...

A further Japanese concept, ‘*Tsudoi-ba*’ (literally: a space for a meeting / a meeting place) augmented the *Ibasho* concept. *Tsudoi-ba* was where – in friendly and ‘homely’ settings – meetings, peer-interaction and social support could be enjoyed mainly but not exclusively by older people. Examples of these community-rooted, residentially located, and essentially non-institutional settings include: Community Cafes; Carers’ Groups; Dementia Cafes; All-Day Activity Centres; Drop-in Lunch Clubs; Open House – as well as the actual *Ibasho* Cafes themselves.

Looking at the 'open house' initiative illuminates an underpinning platform for most if not actually all of these models – the increasing widespread use of low-rent, unoccupied housing in a residential setting. 'Open house' literally opened up unoccupied dwellings to the local community to generate peer-support, empathy and understanding – along with the provision of lunch and a range of care and support. Again, the key words here are: low rent / unoccupied / residential setting.

These flexible, community-rooted and volunteer-driven initiatives relied and depended on access to low cost, unoccupied, residential dwellings from the 13.5% of Japan's housing stock. Worth an estimated £280,000 million, these 8.2 million empty dwellings are predicted to become a staggering 43% of the nation's housing stock by 2040. The economic implications of these facts are profound – and worthy of investigation in another quarter – but it certainly augurs well for the Ibasho / Tsudoi-ba initiative which depends upon access to relatively inexpensive, empty houses.

The supply of such untenanted housing varies across the rural-urban divide: but even along this axis there are supply inconsistencies. In Osaka City, 17.2% remain unoccupied while in Okinawa Prefecture – with its growing population – the figure is 10.4%. In Miyagi Prefecture, after the March 2011 earthquake, empty housing is only 9.4%. These are anomalies – generally, the unoccupancy levels are higher in the rural and semi-rural areas and remain lower in the urban zones.

However, access to this specific *tranche* of housing stock – low cost, for rent and in a residential setting – needed the assistance and intervention from local and central government. Keen to get many of the initiatives underway – and later to promote the replication of the more successful schemes – local authorities formulated facilitating policies. These measures were varied and had mixed results:

- One Tokyo borough council called for owners of local empty dwellings to donate (at nil rent return) their houses for Ibasho / Tsudoi-ba style initiatives – a mere 23 responded. The council then offered these 23 'informal social spaces' (empty houses) to a range of voluntary and community organisations to try to match their accommodation-of-scheme needs. Three were selected in 2013. One became a Dementia Café, supported by some public funding, for people with dementia and their families and carers.
- In another Tokyo suburb, the council conducted a survey-audit of empty housing stock and identified opportunities for renovation – by student cohorts and local volunteers – before the house was offered to community groups for social space purposes.
- In other instances, the financial equation was balanced by offering subsidies either to participating landlords / owners – or given as a grant-in-aid measure to voluntary organisations using the facilities.
- In Kobe City, responding to the success of an 'open house' venture (Tsudoi-ba Sakura-chan – discussed below), the council promoted the replication of this successful initiative with pump-priming start up grants together with access to 'expertise' advice and support.

Local authorities could approach the LTCI (the public Long Term Care Insurance scheme) for part-funding support as well as request reimbursement from central government.

Case studies

It would be instructive to take a closer look at two examples of these grassroots, volunteer-led initiatives utilising low cost, empty houses to accommodate their provision embracing Ibasho / Tsudoi-ba principles. These were observed during our recent visit to Japan led by the author.

'Tsudoi-ba Sakura-chan'

In fact-finding mode, we headed for Kobe and the 'Tsudoi-ba Sakura-chan' or 'open house': a privately rented residential dwelling hosting local people with dementia and their carers for lunch – as well as the chance for them to drop-in and chat. In addition, carers were offered respite by peer carers. Run by a charismatic volunteer – unpaid like all her assistants – the manageress was introducing and embedding a 24 hour care helpline specifically to support carers.

We were told that the Kobe City Council viewed the 'Sakura-chan' achievement positively and were already promoting its replication – with funding and support. Interestingly, it was indicated that during the process of replicating the successful model, there would be few constraints in the form of over-protective risk assessments or binding red-tape formalities to be battled with: the volunteers would be left to design and deliver their lunch and drop-in facility unencumbered by City Hall bureaucracy.

Situated next door to the local authority council offices, 'Sakura-chan' lunch was on offer to officials, multi-disciplinary professionals and care managers – a unique chance for informal, frank and meaningful dialogue where the amateurs could tell the professionals exactly what it's like to be a carer, or a member of a family with an immediate relative who had dementia.



Visitors and a lunch spread at 'Tsudoi-ba Sakura-chan' in Kobe

In the 'homely' setting – and sometimes over lunch – carers were clearly able to relax, offer peer-support, network animatedly – or simply just share experiences and chat. An invaluable service was clearly being made available in an informal and friendly atmosphere – but we discovered an even deeper and more meaningful level of support available: in addition to the co-ordination of respite care and the 24 hour care helpline, the 'Sakura-chan' offers pre- and post- bereavement counselling and support.

Ibasho principles pervaded the 'Sakura-chan' throughout our visit: a 99 year old woman with advanced dementia was allowed to consume her lunch – eating it with her fingers – at a snail's pace of two hours. Surely a humane and empathetic example of the precept to 'embrace imperfections' being put into practice.

'Suzu-no-ya'

On another visit: to the warm welcome at the 'Suzu-no-ya' – a further example of the 'open house' based in residential suburbia, on the outskirts of Tokyo. In this rented house, volunteers welcome local people with dementia and their carers to lunch and companionship – within an informal environment. In addition, like the 'Sakura-chan' initiative, 'Suzu-no-ya' volunteers run a 24 hour care helpline for carers together with preparation for pre- and post- bereavement counselling. This support was always provided on a peer-support and voluntary basis. The 'Suzu-no-ya' offers something quite unique – though no doubt this 'best practice' will soon be replicated. Once a week, the house is 'opened up' from 9.00 to 17.00 to receive a dozen or more local older residents – especially those living alone, in isolation or with dementia. Carers withdraw to lunch upstairs – a short term respite – or enjoy either peer-support, or all day respite at home. The ethos is a 'professional-free' zone: emphasising that all those benefiting are deemed to be normal and ordinary – again, 'embracing imperfection'. We understand that in many cases volunteers at the 'Suzu-no-ya' are often – in another role later on in the week – actually family carers, and bring this experience and expertise with them to the all day provision.



A gathering at the 'Suzu-no-ya' open house in suburban Tokyo

The opportunity to acquire the premises for the 'Suzu-no-ya' project arose – and presented itself – through the local grapevine. Following the death of a neighbourhood friend's mother, the house became empty – and available. The volunteers moved quickly and within a few weeks had occupied and adapted the premises to fit their needs. The rent was negotiated – and was very low: £500 a month – a fraction for the current going-rate for a large, detached house and garden. However, £500 is a stiff challenge for volunteers to meet – every month – together with ongoing costs and utility bills. The books were balanced by the low-cost payment for lunch (£3.60 – a similar meal in a Tokyo canteen would cost £7.00). Some private donations flowed in and for the first six months the local authority assisted with essential start up costs. With a certain business flair, the manageress negotiated a small but steady funding stream from a number of local private and voluntary care-providers. A feature of the community-rooted, voluntary-driven sector in Japan is that it is strongly peer-to-peer supported and sustained.

The open house was a low key building – in so far as there was no signage or any distinguishing features: our taxi driver could not actually find it – some local children smiled and helped out.

Conclusion: Could any of these examples work in the UK?

The answers depend on how much the government – local and central – wish to utilise and liberate empty housing stock for these purposes. Is there a sufficient supply – in residential areas – of suitable properties? What would the neighbours say? Property prices are very sensitive to unconventional practices – and vulnerable to potential prejudices.

And City Hall? Would they smother such initiatives in the over-protective wreathes of planning red-tape and stall initiatives with the endless compliance with the ubiquitous risk assessments, safeguarding and health and safety evaluations?

And is there an appetite in our current society for the professionals to give the go-ahead and allow volunteers to offer such a level of care and support to those perceived to be vulnerable?

With the implementation of the Care Act in full swing and a growing emphasis on mutuality and reciprocity in the way we co-create person-centred and community solutions, perhaps we should open our house to the lessons we can learn from Japan?

About the author

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Note

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

About the Housing LIN

Previously responsible for managing the Department of Health's Extra Care Housing Fund, the Housing Learning and Improvement Network (LIN) is the leading 'learning lab' for a growing network of housing, health and social care professionals in England involved in planning, commissioning, designing, funding, building and managing housing, care and support services for older people and vulnerable adults with long term conditions.

For further information about the Housing LIN's comprehensive list of online resources and to participate in our shared learning and service improvement networking opportunities, including 'look and learn' site visits and network meetings in your region, but I am afraid not Japan (unless there is a generous benefactor!), visit: www.housinglin.org.uk

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