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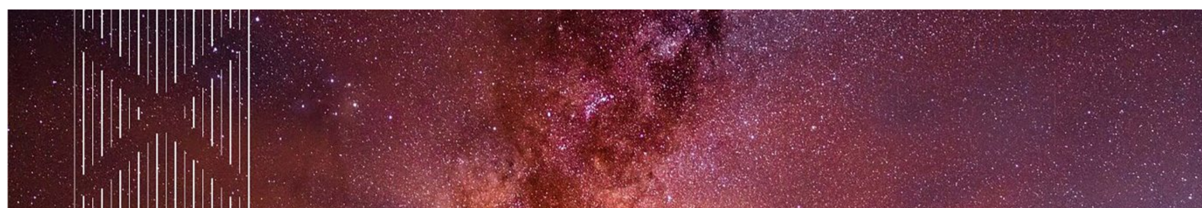

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Renovation Machizukuri in Contemporary Japan: The Cases of Suwa, Kokura and Onomichi

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Abstract

The increasing number of vacant properties is a pressing challenge in Japan today. Depopulated towns and neighbourhoods are experiencing socio-economic decline. In response, citizen groups have carried out diverse activities known as "machizukuri" to improve the quality of life in their communities and living environments. Since the 2000s, machizukuri practices that involve the renovation of vacant building stock came to be known as "renovation machizukuri" (renovation town-making) which emphasizes social engagement through participatory design and do-it-yourself (DIY) building methods. This paper presents examples of renovation machizukuri that have emerged in recent years and are still ongoing in three Japanese cities – Suwa, Kokura and Onomichi. These three case studies shed light on the evolving role of architects and professionals who work together with citizens and volunteers in the sharing of knowledge and resources drawn together through strong social networks both online and offline. They are part of a larger movement in the rise of renovation culture, signifying a new era in contemporary Japanese architecture and town planning.

Introduction

Japan is one of the first countries to transition into a post-growth society.[1] The miracle period of economic growth in the post-war years propelled Japan into an unprecedented urban transformation during the 1960s, as exemplified by the "faster, higher, stronger" slogan for the 1964 Tokyo Olympics. The high-growth period from the 1960s saw the completion of large infrastructure projects, transport systems, and mega-developments especially in Tokyo, which had become the world's largest metropolis. Since the burst of the bubble economy in the early 1990s, Japan entered a period of slowdown with a stagnant economy. The concentration of population in Tokyo and other large cities led to issues of uneven development and access to resources, especially for rural and peripheral areas. Natural disasters further prompted the need for social and

environmental sustainability. The 2011 Great East Japan Earthquake was seen as a catalyst for social design and the emergence of alternative practices that prioritize placemaking, co-creation, and participation.[2] More recently, a 2022 exhibition at the Swiss Architecture Museum in Basel, titled *Make Do With Now: New Directions in Japanese Architecture,* showcased the next generation of architects in Japan who are "developing a range of critical, ecological, and social approaches that creatively 'make do' – with limited resources, found materials, and existing space."[3] Many are taking matters into their own hands, tackling renovation projects themselves through low-tech, do-it-yourself (DIY) methods with like-minded collaborators.

Architects in Japan today must respond to contemporary socio-economic and environmental challenges such as depopulation and the increase in vacant building stock. Renovation has become a key strategy in community design and revitalization activities known as "renovation machizukuri." Collective efforts by both professionals such as architects and non-professional volunteers have slowly transformed local regions through incremental renovations of multiple projects over time. Though most of the buildings may not have high heritage value, some have gained heritage status after renovation activities raised awareness. Renovation also contributes to the concept of "preservation through use," which not only extends the life of buildings and preserves the character of the area, but also ensures the long-term vitality of the region through the creation of new businesses and jobs.

The paper first outlines the development of machizukuri and renovation culture in Japan before introducing case studies of three renovation communities that have emerged since the 2000s in small towns outside large city centres, where the effects of ageing and decline are most severe:

I. ReBuilding Center Japan in Suwa, a city in Nagano Prefecture;
II. Renovation School, which originates from Kokura, a district in the city of Kitakyushu, Fukuoka Prefecture; and
III. Onomichi Vacant House Renewal Project in Onomichi, a city in Hiroshima Prefecture.

Machizukuri as an Alternative to Traditional Town Planning

"Machizukuri" is considered a relatively new term in the history of city planning in Japan, first used in the early 1950s. It is vague, broad and hard to translate, as terms such as "community development," "community design" and "community building" are too narrow

and limited.[4] While there is no single definition, scholar Shigeru Satoh describes machizukuri 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.”[5] For the purposes of this paper, the literal translation of machizukuri as “town-making”[6] is most relevant when referring to “renovation machizukuri,” owing to the physical (re)making of space through renovation. Machizukuri calls for increased citizen participation in decision-making processes concerned with the management of community life.[7] The diverse efforts of local citizen groups in activities related to placemaking, architecture, urban planning and heritage have come to be known under the umbrella term “machizukuri.”[8] Machizukuri is seen as a form of participation urbanism to address issues through the collaboration of citizens, experts (e.g., architects and planners) and local government, when the planning system fails to provide the desired improvement or preservation of the urban environment.[9]

Planning scholar Shun-ichi J. Watanabe contrasts the term with the traditional statutory city planning in Japan known as *toshi keikaku* (literally “city planning”), an older term dating back to 1913, which describes the top-down Japanese planning system as one based on a set of national laws from the government.[10] In contrast, machizukuri denotes a wide range of activities centred on the local community and civil society, including not-for-profit organizations (NPOs), neighbourhood associations and citizen groups. It rose in prominence in the latter half of the 1960s during a period of protest and activism in reaction to the adverse effects of growth-oriented urban renewal that caused pollution and deteriorated living environments.[11] Concerns over the loss of heritage was another factor leading to protests over new construction and calls to maintain local character and preserve historical districts.[12] In 1968 the City Planning Law was passed to support the decentralization of planning to local municipalities, which bolstered the establishment of local machizukuri groups. Machizukuri is representative of the need for public participation in urban governance across cities in Asia, where people are starting to claim their “right to the city” in similar ways to other civil society movements in the West.[13]

Machizukuri has also played a large role in post-disaster reconstruction. The 1995 Great Hanshin-Awaji Earthquake in Kobe saw an unprecedented number of volunteers, and over a hundred machizukuri organizations were active immediately after the disaster.[14] In 1998, the Law to Promote-Specified Non-profit Activities (“NPO Law”) was established to allow NPOs and community groups to become incorporated and have a legal foundation on equal terms with the government. This asserted the value of machizukuri

and the inclusion of civil society in disaster recovery, which once again proved crucial after the 2011 Great East Japan Earthquake in Tohoku. The disaster triggered a rise in socially engaged design with an emphasis on the role of architects, activists, and designers to lead participatory placemaking practices that emphasized place-specificness, co-creation, and community resilience. [15] Machizukuri highlighted the importance of self-help initiatives that leverage social capital and networks in the rebuilding of soft infrastructure, which is often overlooked by government efforts that focus on the physical building of hard infrastructure.[16] By the 2000s, machizukuri had spread widely and became an established community-based approach that was accepted as an integral part of urban planning in Japan.[17]

The Rise of Renovation

The first businesses specializing in extensions and renovations in Japan were established around 1975. They focused on repairing old buildings, a process often referred to as *rifōmu* (reform) in Japanese to describe the act of restoring deteriorated buildings to their original state. The word *rinobēshon* (renovation) became widely used in the media from the 1990s, when the scale and volume of renovation activities increased after the high-growth period. One of the early architects to focus on renovation projects, Yoshihiko Oshima from Blue Studio, differentiated the two terms by describing *rifōmu* as being limited to repairing and maintaining the hardware of a building, whereas *rinobēshon* includes considering the software such as the future use and how new programs can add value to benefit the area as a whole.[18] Arts & Crafts, one of the first companies to focus solely on renovation projects, organized an exhibition in 2018 titled *Renovation 1998 – 2018 and Then,* which traced twenty years of renovation activities in Japan. It profiled thirty key renovation practitioners from various backgrounds and their projects, showing how renovation developed from single residential buildings to other typologies such as share houses, guest houses, coworking spaces, and urban development. [19] By the 2000s, clear renovation communities had formed with key individuals, NPOs, and companies working exclusively on renovation projects throughout Japan.

The proliferation of vacant building stock is another factor that contributed to the rise of renovation in Japan. The number of vacant houses (*akiya*) is often covered in the media as a serious issue. According to the 2018 Housing and Land Statistics Survey conducted by the Statistics Bureau of the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications, the number of vacant houses is 8.76 million accounting for 13.6% of the total number of

62.42 million houses.[20] At the same time, the number of new constructions is still increasing, even though the overall population and need for housing is shrinking. The surplus in existing building stock, coupled with the change in working styles and lack of long-term stable employment, has made it harder for young people to purchase and own new properties. Cheaper alternatives from the second-hand market have become an attractive option for many. The younger generation are also questioning the current unsustainable consumer culture and traditional scrap-and-build mentality in favour of a more sustainable approach.

How then have renovation projects developed to encompass the regeneration of whole areas and regions? The next section will introduce three case studies of renovation-based machizukuri practices, known as renovation machizukuri, which have emerged since the 2000s. They are different to the more standard machizukuri approaches that traditionally involve government-approved machizukuri councils, which carry out activities under a predefined machizukuri plan. All cases have varying levels of input from the government, private sector and NPO groups, involving collaborations between professionals and amateurs. The three examples are well-known initiatives in Japan that have created strong networks of diverse participants, forming new communities brought together by the shared process of renovation.

Kokura's Renovation Machizukuri

Against the backdrop of population decline and changes in social structure, the hollowing out of town centres has made them experimental grounds for renovation. Kokura Kita Ward (Kokurakita-ku) – where Kokura Station, Kitakyushu's main railway hub – is located, had a population of about 370,000 in 1973, which was halved to about 180,000 by 2014. The nearby Uomachi Gintengai was once a bustling shopping district in the 1960s, when large industrial companies supporting Japan's rapid economic growth were based in Kitakyushu. As primary industries declined and large stores moved to the suburbs where new residential areas were developed, empty office spaces and closed shops increased in the shopping district and surrounding areas. Building vacancy in the Kokura area surpassed 18% in 2008, above the national average of 13%. With a rising number of vacant tenancies, visitors also decreased, leading to a vicious cycle of decline.

In 2010, the city of Kitakyushu set up a committee consisting of academics, government officials, local people from the shopping district, and experts in the field of urban

regeneration to assist with Kokura's regeneration efforts. The committee developed a strategy to revitalize the town centre by creating employment opportunities for people to utilize vacant buildings. The first project collaboration was with Tokyo-based architect Yohei Shimada of Lion Kenchiku. Shimada, originally from Kitakyushu, worked on the transformation of the Nakaya Building in Uomachi Gintengai into a bustling shopping complex. As the floorplates were too large making them expensive to rent out to one tenant, they were broken up into smaller tenancies that could be rented at a below market rate that attracted young creatives and entrepreneurs to sign up before renovation started. The result was Mercato 3, an eclectic offering of restaurants, second-hand clothing stores, shared studios, and offices (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Nakaya Building before and after
(Photograph by Lion Kenchiku).

The project was the catalyst for a series of subsequent renovations in the area, including the coworking space MIKAGE1881, hostel and cafe Tanga Table, and Comichi, a strip of *nagaya* (wooden tenement housing) renovated into rental spaces catering to mothers who wanted to start small businesses. The strategy of renovation combined with business creation through collaborative efforts between architects, property owners, and future users was promoted as "renovation machizukuri" after the establishment of the Kitakyushu Renovation Machizukuri Promotion Council in 2011.

To promote the renovation machizukuri approach as a replicable model, the Renovation School was established soon after the completion of Mercato 3. The school provides existing underutilized properties as teaching materials and requires participants required

to carry out on-site surveys and discussions before making feasible proposals towards the realization of actual projects. It is run as a multi-day workshop, usually lasting three to four days, during which participants work in small groups to formulate a business plan for a specific vacant property. The participants come from different backgrounds, including those wanting to start a small business, designers, homemakers, and students. They are supported by lectures and guidance from experts across the fields of architecture, design, and renovation. On the last day, the participants propose their business plans to property owners, who then select the best plans that will be refined further implementation. The workshop format was held twelve times from 2011 to 2018, from which sixteen projects had been implemented by 2015.[21] As of March 2022, the number of participants in Renovation School events has reached over 5,700 nationwide spanning over ninety cities in Japan, as well as some in Korea.[22]

After the first Renovation School course was held, its core members established a private company called Kitakyushu Yamorisha in 2012. There was continual and increased demand to support property owners in commercializing their vacant properties by connecting them with entrepreneurs, creatives, and other users. The model is based on the traditional concept of *yamori*, from the Edo period (1600-1867), when housekeepers were employed to help landlords manage their properties. The company collaborates with property owners and the local municipality by jointly investing in projects such as the MIKAGE 1881 coworking space where rent expenses and income are shared by the property owner, Yamorisha, and the town. Subsequent projects completed by the company have created more than three hundred jobs, and numerous events have been held in the shopping district. The initiatives in Kokura demonstrate how long-term residents and property owners can work with those from outside the region to come up with new ideas for the future and sustained use of vacant buildings. The workshop-based format has encouraged input from various collaborators, including residents, and the private and public sectors.

ReBuilding Center Japan Suwa, Nagano

In 2016 a large three-storey second-hand, or “recycle” shop opened in the small town of Suwa, about two-and-a-half-hours from Tokyo on the bullet train. It offers a range of recycled building materials, tools and furniture rescued from demolished buildings (Figure 2). This is the base of ReBuilding Center Japan, known as Ribisen for short.[23] In addition to selling second-hand goods and tools, Ribisen’s goal is to promote a new way of thinking that creates new value from old things.

Figure 2. The inside of ReBuilding Center Japan showing the collection of second-hand goods on sale (Photograph by Nancy Ji).

The founders, Azuno and Kanako Tadafumi, were active as designer-builders running their studio Medicala, working like nomads renovating guesthouses and cafés throughout Japan. Frequently travelling to stay on site to complete projects, they encountered many vacant houses that were often demolished with everything still inside. On a trip to Portland, Oregon, the couple visited the ReBuilding Center and were touched by their motto "building community through reuse." There was nothing similar in Japan at the time, which inspired them to set one up after acquiring a three-storey property in Suwa. Around half the visitors now come from outside the region, and many visit on the weekend. To fund the ReBuilding Center Japan project, an online crowd-funding campaign was launched successfully, collecting 5.4 million yen, 181% over the targeted amount. After securing the vacant property, renovation was completed in two months by five staff members and nearly five hundred volunteer helpers known as "supporters."

Ribisen now has a staff of twenty-two, sixteen of whom are working full time. Most have been able to move to Suwa from elsewhere and make a living by working at Ribisen. Each has their own role, such as creating promotional content for the second-hand shop, managing and shipping online orders, completing custom furniture orders and running monthly events such as DIY workshops that teach participants how to upcycle and use power tools. Ribisen continues to manage an ongoing system of supporters who are an integral part of the labour force. The supporter system invites volunteers to stay in Suwa by offering them accommodation and food in exchange for helping with a range of daily

activities, such as dismantling, picking up, cleaning, and sorting materials. Supporters have included design students, people interested in DIY, and those interested in moving to the area, enabling them to get to know the town and community of Suwa. The café (Figure 3) has also become a popular gathering place for locals and visitors including DIY enthusiasts. Ribisen also continues to offer design and construction services and have completed projects all over Japan.

Figure 3. Café entrance at ReBuilding Center Japan. The front of the café is made from repurposed windows and doors (Photograph by Nancy Ji).

In November 2022, there was a new project under construction a few doors down the road. It is one of Ribisen's current design and build projects – a bookstore, the first of its kind in the area. The owner of the store is a woman who had recently moved into the area. She had seen a call-out on Ribisen's Instagram page, where co-founder Kanako had lamented the lack of bookstores in Suwa and hoped someone would open one in a vacant property that had become available. The bookstore owner contacted Kanako who connected her with the property. Since starting the renovation process, the bookstore owner is now working on site everyday with carpenters from Ribisen, and chooses most of the furniture and fixings from the Ribisen shop.

One of the barriers to renovation is access to properties, as it can be difficult to contact or persuade local property owners to rent or sell to people they do not know. Ribisen, having been active for a few years in the area, have built trust with the local community and property owners who may otherwise not rent their properties to outsiders. Ribisen

is also providing much-needed information about available properties and connecting them to potential users through their large social network, both online and offline. Thus, Ribisen has broken down the barriers for new people from outside the region wishing to set up business in the area by renovating various properties into guest houses, cafés, bakeries and shops in Suwa and surrounding areas. It is an example of a private company that welcomes the public as supporters into its community and provides valuable support for those considering moving into the area.

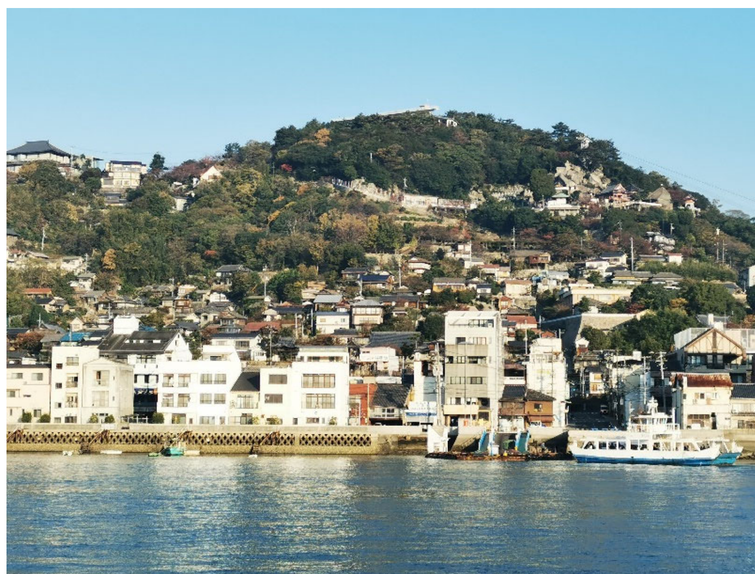

Figure 4. In the Yamate district, houses are built on the slopes of the mountain overlooking the Seto Inland Sea (Photograph by Nancy Ji).

Vacant House Revival in Onomichi

Onomichi is a quaint town in Hiroshima Prefecture, built around a port that was established over 850 years ago (Figure 04). The area on the mountain overlooking the Seto Inland Sea is known as the Yamate district and is now a popular tourist attraction with many temples dotted on the slopes. It is a historic city well known in literature and cinema, having 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 disaster. Indeed, the town has been described as a kind of outdoor architecture museum (*tatemono no hakubutsukan*). One characteristic of the sloping residential areas is the web of narrow walkways, some only barely a metre

wide, making them inaccessible to cars. Current building laws forbid any new building due to road access requirements for fire trucks, limiting any construction to renovation or extensions. Even then, the difficult access means renovation costs are around three times higher compared to the easily accessible flat areas. As a result, many of the houses are left unoccupied as owners do not have the resources to fix and maintain them. It is estimated that over a quarter of the two thousand or so houses around Onomichi station, including the sloped areas, are vacant.

Figure 5. Gaudi House was the first vacant house purchased by NPO Aki-P founder Masako Toyota. Renovation started in 2007 and was completed in 2020. It was designated Tangible Cultural Property in 2013 (Photograph by Nancy Ji).

Masako Toyota, a former tour guide, had returned to her hometown of Onomichi in her early 30s to raise her young children. Motivated to do something about the rising number of vacant houses, she purchased one in 2007 on the sloped Yamate area and began renovating it with her carpenter husband. Nicknamed Gaudi House (Figure 5), she started to document the renovation progress on her blog. People became interested in the project with many inquiring about renovation and the availability of vacant houses in the area after reading her blog. This prompted interest in the project, with many people inquiring about renovation and the availability of vacant houses in the area. Soon, a voluntary organization was established and formally incorporated as an NPO called the Onomichi Vacant House Renewal Project (*Onomichi Akiya saisei purojekuto)*, known as Aki-P for short.

Since its inception in 2008, Aki-P has renovated around twenty properties, including guest houses, share houses, cafés, and an artist-in-residence. From 2009, it has also worked to disseminate information on vacant houses and promote migration to Onomichi through managing the vacant house bank for the town, helping to match over a hundred houses to new residents. Other key activities include holding the annual Onomichi Architecture School, where architects and university professors lead walking tours and renovation workshops for students and the public to experience on-site renovation projects guided by local carpenters and craftspeople. Regular meetings and public discussions are also held to discuss strategies on how to best utilize vacant houses with presentations by guest researchers and experts to share their knowledge. Events such as flea markets are held to sell goods left behind in the houses.

One of the first projects was a small two-storey house, which had a leaky roof, extensive termite damage, and rotting beams after lying empty for twenty years. More than one hundred people were involved in the renovation process, including volunteers guided by specialists. Structural work was carried out by experts, while building workshops were held for the public to learn and experience various renovation techniques with craftspeople, plasterers, carpenters, and architects. The space opened in early 2009 and is now used as the NPO office and a space for mothers and children (Figure 6). Subsequent projects follow similar methods of volunteers and specialists working on the renovation together, including two guest houses now managed by the NPO providing employment for young people in the town.

Figure 6. Kitamura Shoten is now used as an office space for the NPO above and a resting space for mothers and children below (Photograph by Nancy Ji).

Two properties, Gaudi House (Figure 5) and guest house Miharashi Tei (Figure 7) were successfully designated Tangible Cultural Properties by the Agency for Cultural Affairs after the NPO applied for recognition.[24] Onomichi's NPO led renovation movement is an example of a not-for-profit initiative that aims to support people's livelihoods while preserving an old historical area based on the motto of "preservation through use."

Figure 7. Miharashi Tei is one of two renovated properties now operating as guest houses by the NPO Akiya-P. It was registered as a Tangible Cultural Property in 2013 (Photograph by Nancy Ji).

Conclusion

The three examples presented are indicative of a new era for architecture and machizukuri activities from the 2000s. The rise of renovation has opened architecture to a wider audience to include non-professionals and amateurs. University of Tokyo professor Shuichi Matsumura described this as a new era of "open architecture" where ordinary people could participate in placemaking efforts through DIY renovations.[25] Renovation machizukuri has diversified the activities of professionals such as architects and planners and their role in civil society. Though professional carpenters and trade professionals are still employed for specific jobs, the rise of DIY renovation undertaken by the wider public has seen architects transition to roles beyond design. Architects and designers such as Shimada who started the Kitakyushu Yamorisha property management company and Tadafumi from Ribisen running a café and store are both entrepreneurs in addition to taking on design work. Shimada also runs a small bakery in his local neighbourhood where he works in his spare time. He believes that running a local business is a crucial part of being involved in community life, giving him the chance to create the "contents" of the building, which he sees as more important than the

container or building itself. Matsumura uses the phrase "democratization of architecture" to highlight the transition of the construction industry supplying buildings as "boxes" to meet demand, to the current renovation climate that utilizes the left over boxes to create more meaningful "places" (*ba*) focused on the creative activities taking place within them.

Architects are also working closely with NPOs and members of the community as equal contributors that break down the traditional architect-client relationship in the co-creation of renovation projects. Co-creation can be seen as a modern form of *yu*i, a kind of mutual assistance and collaborative work originating from traditional Japanese village life (Figure 8). Villagers would help each other in the building and maintenance of houses such as the rethatching of straw roofs, which needed many hands to complete in a timely manner.

Figure 8. A modern form of *yu*i in Onomichi. Volunteers working together to dispose of waste materials in a relay format and plastering walls during a workshop (Photographs by Onomichi Akiya Saisei Purojekuto).

The process of renovation also emphasizes inclusivity and flexibility for different people to contribute their own skills as seen in the supporter system at Ribisen, or the diverse profiles of volunteers at renovation workshops in Onomichi, who range from school children to elderly locals. The adoption of technology and social media, where renovation leaders skilfully gather diverse participants from both their own social networks, as well as reaching strangers via platforms such as Facebook and Instagram, further promote inclusivity by allowing anyone to easily get in contact to participate or support renovation endeavours. Rather than a single client funding the projects, call outs

on social media through crowd-funding campaigns have raised funds from hundreds of supporters, including the initial Ribisen renovation and the Miharashi Tei Guest House in Onomichi, allowing the public to choose which projects they would like to see realized.

Though the case studies represent a new era of machizukuri, they are still based on traditional concepts such as *yamori* and *yui*. All three examples are still ongoing after many years, allowing small-scale changes that adapts to the changing needs of a locality over time. Each started with one key project that gathered a community of people to build up momentum, know-how, and skills for subsequent renovations. The open workshop format adopted provides accessible venues for public participation, including those directly related to the region such as building owners and people living in the area, as in the case of the Renovation School workshops held across Japan. As described by architect Yohei Shimada, "renovation is no longer just about refurbishing a building, it is about changing the atmosphere of an entire area." [26] With more buildings being renovated, new businesses and jobs are created, attracting new people to move to the area, which in turn attracts more visitors to depopulated regions. Many previous volunteers such as Ribisen supporters maintain connections to the local area, returning regularly as another source of support and exchange between regions. In addition to the sustained use of the buildings, many events and activities are held regularly to further engage with the wider town and community, such as the walking tours, various talks, and exhibitions in the case of Onomichi.

As renovation machizukuri continues to develop in Japan, some thoughts for further research are outlined below. Firstly, the practice of DIY renovation machizukuri is diverse and varied, and existing research is mainly based on single case studies with a focus on successful cases in specific localities. How can one measure the success (or not) of renovation machizukuri to understand if there are common recipes for success that can be applied over multiple locations? What are some best practices that could serve as guidelines without restricting creativity?

Secondly, the DIY approach of making do with what is at hand by using available and repurposed materials deserves further investigation. How can the field of architecture recognize DIY as a legitimate method, particularly in areas relating to community revitalization and heritage? For example, we need new ways to evaluate heritage to include more diverse approaches such as DIY renovation, as opposed to strictly regulated restoration, which could be instrumental in the preservation of old townscapes

as in the case of Onomichi. Though there is still much more to learn in the field of renovation machizukuri, what is clear is that the increased number of renovation projects reflect contemporary realities and attitudes in Japan, where people are advocating for a more socially engaged and environmentally conscious approach to the practice of architecture and town planning. It is time to open wider discussion on the topic of renovation machizukuri as a promising way forward for inclusive placemaking in post-growth Japan.

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