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Preserving Historical Structures, Motivations of Property Owners, and the Effects on Community Socio-Economic Renewal in Japan

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Abstract

Japan, perhaps more than any nation, embodies the issues and contradictions surrounding depopulation and its subsequent effects on rural communities, including the conservation of a locality's traditional vernacular architecture and the cultural practices associated with their construction and preservation. Official programs aimed at revitalization of the Japanese countryside or smaller regional centers have proven ineffective, largely due to funding or a reliance on "return to hometown" programs aimed at retirees or a small number of the working-age cohort wishing to pursue an alternative to urban lifestyles. As a result, these communities have continued to rapidly decline, resulting in an estimated 8 million abandoned or underutilized buildings throughout the country, including perhaps up to 1 million extant vernacular-built heritage structures. The loss of these structures and their attendant use values, artisanal techniques and practices used in their construction and maintenance, as well as the more intangible aspects of their presence in a community, represents a profound challenge which evades simple solutions. Adaptive reuse, or the renovation or rehabilitation of built structures for new purposes, may present the most comprehensive strategy through which a variety of stakeholders may arrest or at least slow these processes. By examining the motivations of, and obstacles faced by, a small but growing group of enthusiasts undertaking rehabilitation projects of these built heritage structures, a new, more grassroots-based revitalization strategy can be elucidated and exported to similarly challenged communities.

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Keywords

Akiya; Akichi; U/I-Turn; Cultural Altruism; Choice Compression; Construction State

1. Introduction

In Japan, an estimated 8 million vacant, underutilized, or abandoned extant built structures, called *akiya* (Dornhege, 2018; Rausch, 2020), now lie extant amidst 4.1 million hectares of former commercial sites, or brownfields (called *akichi*), which stand untenanted throughout the country, mostly, though not exclusively, in rural communities (Brasor & Tsukubu, 2021; Geeraert, 2022; Nomura, 2018). While Kendall (1999) notes that buildings are designed for planned obsolescence (italics mine), we are nevertheless faced with simple but stark choices in the built environment: to rebuild, to rehabilitate, to ignore and attempt to carry on, or to abandon the structure entirely. Each choice carries with it both opportunities and consequences for the surrounding community, the remaining built environment, the socio-economic outcomes of the area and, due to the construction industry's outsize impact on the global greenhouse gas emissions, the planet itself (Foster, 2020; Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, 2021; Lawrence, 2015; Mowrey, 2021; Shank, 2022). Japan, perhaps more than any other nation, embodies these inconsistencies to a degree

both fascinating and frustrating, depending on one's perspective. The nation of mottainai (wasteful, but used more as an admonishment against waste), kaizen (continual improvement) and the satoyama (mountain village, typically portrayed as a more sustainable, self-sufficient way of life) (Brownell, 2021; Brown, 2013; Imagawa, 2022; Itsurō, 2022), points towards a culture of thoughtful design and a more balanced approach to human habitation, and a more evenly weighted balance between the natural and built environment. Yet, Japan is also second largest consumer of disposable plastic in the world (Imagawa, 2022) and the country of "scrap and build" (Iwamura, 2017; Kerr, 2002; 2015; Kubo & Yui, 2020; Yoshida, 2021), with new construction consistently outpacing demand, and indeed population (Kato, 2014; Koizumi, 2022; Statistics Bureau of Japan, n.d.) despite Jane Jacobs' warning (1961, as cited in Ijla & Broström, 2015) that any development "will fail if the number of patrons are simply inadequate to make the continuation of life feasible".

The current situation has attracted attention from global media (Kerr, 2022; Ketchum, 2021; Kubo, 2021; Kubo & Yui, 2020), often with headlines about cheap (by Western market standards) or "free houses" as well as towns even paying for new residents to move into their emptying communities. Housing is assumed to be relatively worthless in relation to the land it sits upon (Alexander, 2021; Brasor & Tsubuku, 2023), and has an approximate 30-40 year life span (Dornhege, 2018; Iwamura, 2017; Overstreet, 2022) where it thereupon is either demolished or added to the growing *akiya* numbers extant throughout the country. Moreover, paradoxically, it is also argued that this ephemeral approach to the home itself is what gives architects, of whom there are more per capita than anywhere in the world (Kotre, 2020), the allowance to use houses (and buildings) as an experimental canvas that can advance design and challenge what architecture is capable of in a wide variety of situations and construction environments (Aouf, 2021; Heathcote, 2017; Moonan, 2021; Roovice, 2022; Townsend, 2013). Traditional structures such as Kyoto's much photographed machiya present a time-capsule, a new build holds possibilities. As Daubaryte (2015) observes, "Public perception of heritage, as a phenomenon, is not immune to contradiction".

Yoshida (2021) summarizes the situation as one of "(a) fast appreciation of housing value, a thin secondary market, and low maintenance of existing properties" It is this secondary market of Japanese Vernacular Built Heritage (JVBH), particularly *minka* (farmhouses) which forms the focal point for this study.

Vernacular built heritage, a term that first emerged in 1850 (Brand, 1997), comprises a small but significant percentage of *akiya*, taking on different forms throughout the country. Extant examples such as *minka* (or *kominka*; literally "people's houses", the distinction between the two terms is somewhat fluid) and related historical built heritage properties such as *machiya* (town houses), *nagaya* (row houses), *kura* (warehouses) embody Flores' (1973, as cited in Fuentes, 2010) contention that such structure are "strongly influenced by the landscape, the climatic conditions and the available resources" with a design template drawn from locally available materials, namely native timber such as pine (*matsu*), cryptomeria (*sugi*) and cypress (*hinoki*), to maximize space, utility and ventilation in temperate environments marked by high humidity and periodic meteorological events such as typhoons using highly refined construction techniques perfected over centuries and uniquely suited to a given locality (Brown, 2013; Murakami, 2011; Nishioka & Kohara, 2016). As Edani (2012) and Nagahata (2022) note Japan's *satoyama* locales represent "...landscape areas that have developed in association with the modes of life or livelihoods of the people and the natural features of the region, which are indispensable for an understanding of our people's modes of life and livelihoods" (sic). These concepts were later formally enshrined in the 1992 World Heritage Convention definition of the "combined works of nature and man" as (i) landscape designed and created intentionally by man (ii) organically evolved landscape and (iii) associative landscape (religious, artistic with natural elements) (Badman et al., 2021).

Vernacular built structures, as integral to Japanese traditional culture as they may be, are still subject to the same market contradictions that drive the housing and construction industries in Japan, as illustrated briefly above. There are conservative estimates of approximately 150-200,000 extant vernacular-built heritage structures (K. Bengs, personal communication, July 20, 2017; Kerr, 2022; Kotrc, 2020) underutilized or abandoned throughout the country. So, while relatively numerous and, as will be explored in more detail below, potentially a more cost-effective and sustainable solution for home buyers or investors, heritage structures are generally seen as undesirable or problematic as a residence or for commercial use by the wider domestic market in Japan, attuned to a preference for new builds and the "convenience" of urban centres continually promulgated by business and political interests (Allen & Wagner, 2023; Kubo & Yui, 2020; Nozawa, 2022; Toda Koumuten, 2021). Moreover, Kamata (2022) cautions that, in a

Japanese context at least, one of the primary barriers to any adaptive reuse reclamation project is the state of not only the building but also the structure's attendant status both legally and within the community.

Historic areas can improve a region's competitive advantage in attracting the "creative class" (or perhaps recently better identified as "digital nomads"), which in turn can improve economic growth, innovation and resilience (Dümcke & Gnedovsky, 2013; Mileto et al., 2015; Stanojev & Gustafsson, 2021 as cited in Gustafsson & Ripp, 2022). As noted above, these structures are, in the main, located in regions undergoing profound demographic shifts through depopulation and the attendant economic effects, which are the very areas where leveraging these existing cultural heritage resources could have the greatest impacts and aid revitalization efforts while also conserving the structure and the traditions that inform their construction and maintenance (Beyer, 2021; Eckelmann, 2021; Rausch, 2008).

This investigation also integrates notions of "semigration" (Donaldson, 2009), differentiation between foreign and local user practices in a given locale and what the author has termed "cultural altruism", or an imperative by an individual or group to intervene in a perceived or real threats to the continuation of historical or cultural traditions or practices, as well as a variation on scarcity (or scarcity credibility), choice compression, or legal-structural or informational, not market-driven, restriction of consumer choice resulting in both an unresolved bottleneck of available options and increased creativity of consumer solutions.

The chosen cohort to form a base from which to explore these, as well as the other issues and confusions the Japanese built environment inevitably presents, is also perhaps one of the less examined; foreign (or joint foreign and Japanese) owners, or operators of businesses, in traditional vernacular built heritage structures known as *minka* (or *kominka*) (Figure 1). Other templates of vernacular-built heritage, such as *machiya* (townhouse), *nagaya* (row house), *kura* (fire-resistant stone warehouses), *yashiki* (estates) or even *danchi* (public apartment complexes), are not the primary focus of this inquiry due to the vast majority of respondents' property categorization being *minka/kominka*. It is the position of this article that this particular cohort embodies many of the key socio-economic political paradoxes outlined above while also serving as a conduit to exploring wider cultural conceptualizations of community, colliding habitus or actor-networks, perceptions and valuations of authenticity, as well as dichotomies informing concepts of sustainability and permanence in the built environment.

Figure 1: Minka in Miyama village, Kyoto-fu. (Adapted from: minkasociety.com)

2. Literature Review

2.1. Adaptive Reuse

The term adaptive reuse first appears in the early 21st Century (Hedieh Arfa et al., 2022) but the practice itself has a long history, such as repurposing monuments for residences, or converting administrative or official buildings for

into industrial or other functions, or more modern interpretations such as brownfields converted into mixed use spaces, and of course boutique hotels occupying former grand homes or prominent buildings (Plevoets & Van Cleempoel, 2011a; Niroumand Shishavan, 2013; Richards, 2017). Adaptive reuse as a concept tends to be somewhat more difficult to define. Latham (2000, as cited in Cucco et al., 2023) notes adaptive reuse as a process that "retains as much as possible of the original building while upgrading the performance to suit modern standards and changing user requirements". Hasnain and Mohseni (2018) assert that adaptive reuse can serve to rehabilitate both the heritage structure and its host community as it "is a process of discovering the potential of a new function to revitalise disused heritage buildings". Austen (as cited in Stas, 2007) takes a more market-focused approach, stating adaptive reuse is "the process by which structurally sound older buildings are developed for economically viable new ones ". Plevoets and Van Cleempoel (2011a; 2011b) further note that, context dependent, remodelling, retrofitting, conversion, adaptation, reworking, rehabilitation or refurbishment can all also be considered forms of adaptive reuse.

Essentially, the debate over historic building conservation was divided into what Brand (1997) has termed "scrape" or removing alterations to old stones or other parts of the fabric and "anti-scrape", best described as "leave the building be". In Brand's view, the "scrape" school held primacy in the 19th Century, but the "anti-scrape" viewpoint became dominant in the 20th century (Brand, 1997).

Japanese traditional and vernacular built heritage encompasses, to a degree, both scrape and anti-scrape aspects such as adherence to basic design norms, consistent layout and congruity of material usage but diverges by incorporating regular replacement of fabric segments which is seen as a crucial part of the structure's life cycle (Larsen, 1994; Nishioka & Kohara, 2016; Tsurutani, 2022), or as Lowenthal (as cited in Ikegaya, 2013) notes "(physical) continuity signifies less to the Japanese than perpetuating the techniques and rituals of re-creation...it is the form that endures, not the substance".

Perhaps by way of example, we may look to the communities of Ichikawa-misato in central Yamanashi Prefecture and Forget (pronounced for-jay), Saskatchewan, Canada, offer an examination of adaptive reuse and how it can impact rural economic revitalisation but also a necessity to consider the the needs of community stakeholders over preservation for preservation's sake. Forget, established in 1899, experienced its largest period of growth after the Canadian Pacific Railway arrived in 1905. However, by 1990 the railway had ceased operations, a story more increasingly common in rural Japan, and a period of decline saw the town's population fall to 35 residents by 2011 (MacDonald, 2017; Statistics Canada, 2016).

Ichikawa-misato claims a much deeper heritage, being founded in the late 16th century, perhaps even earlier. The town became well known for the production of fireworks, washi (Japanese paper) and agricultural products (Ichikawa-misato, n.d.). Yet, like many such towns or villages in Japan, Ichikawa-misato eventually faced socio-economic threats such as declining demand for such traditional craft items, increased competition from large supermarkets and younger generations leaving for educational or work opportunities elsewhere (Ichikawa-misato, n.d.; Nikkei, 2014; Sorensen, 2008; Statistics Japan, 2017).

Returning to Forget, the renovation of its 120-year-old former rectory created a concert hall and creative centre, which in turn led to the opening of The Happy Nun Cafe, itself housed in an adjacent once-abandoned structure. Upon being taken over by chef, the late Katie Vinge-Riddell, the restaurant came to the attention of food bloggers, in turn attracting increased interest through social media sites like Facebook and TripAdvisor. Lured by electronic word of mouth (eWOM) diners travelled from across Canada and the United States to join the local community for meals (MacDonald 2017; The Happy Nun Café – Forget, Sk, n.d.) bringing in much needed income and capital as well as putting Forget back "on the map" (Albon et al., 2018; Burnham et al., 2022; MacDonald, 2017).

The conversion of a Japanese sake kura (warehouse) into a community space in Ichikawa-misato followed a more conventional Japanese path. Led by the Keio University Almazán Lab, a kura (fireproof warehouse) was carefully restored using traditional materials, with as much original fabric as possible kept intact, such as roof tiles and support beams (Keio University Almazán Lab, 2016). As the kura was positioned at the end of a shotengai, a typical Japanese shopping street, the project's objective was to create a multi-purpose, functional space that would maintain the building's historical character with a "broader goal of contributing to the revitalization" of the town (Keio University Almazán Lab, 2016). Interestingly, Almazán Lab did not stop with this comprehensive kura rehabilitation project and

returned to Ichikawa-misato in 2019, renovating a barber shop to include outdoor public space as a means to "disseminate ... a different approach to exterior space and encourage neighbours to install semi-public areas within their sites to increase communication and mitigate the lack of spontaneous encounter" (sic) (Santibañez, 2019).

The renovation of Forget's rectory was a grassroots process led by local residents that eventually created a higher profile for the town, increased business opportunities through attendant sales or live concerts at the Happy Nun, in turn eventually contributing to a modest increase in the village's full-time resident population (McDonald 2017; Statistics Canada, n.d). Manewa et al. (2016) label this as "bespoke solutions" that are "flexible to varying stakeholder needs", a principal objective that should drive commercial or community adaptive reuse projects.

Ichikawa-misato's rehabilitation of a sake warehouse adhered to more established procedures but with similar motivations, to preserve the structure and, in turn, attempt to aid revitalization efforts. Experts led the project, the local community was consulted, and an important historic structure was preserved (Keio University Almazán Lab, 2016; Shehada et al., 2015). Yet, migration continues while increased economic activity, such as increased tourism and/or new businesses, has yet to materialize in a statistically significant manner (Ichikawa-Misato n.d.; Statistics Japan, n.d.). As we can glimpse from these two examples, Heritage Led Regeneration is a potential solution, but by no means a sure one.

2.2. U/I Turn

The original idea of "U-Turn" was one infused with nostalgia for the *furasato*, the hometown as a largely imagined idyll of a more relaxed lifestyle amongst nature (see Booth 2020; 2021 and Kerr, 2015) that was meant to appeal to either a town's diaspora, former residents who left to seek economic opportunities in the cities, or recent retirees seeking to leave after concluding their careers. A major, if unspoken, caveat being that U-Turners were welcomed, or welcomed back, but were expected to conform to the community rather than add new imperatives to it.

By contrast, "I-Turners" are noted to trend younger, and crucially, are more diverse in household make-up and their objectives. They are generally born or form households in urban areas, then move to more rural areas for a variety of motivations such as lifestyle, environment, or, as in the case of this inquiry, an interest in built heritage. Sharing commonalities with configurist notions of rural entrepreneurship (RE), particularly the focus on human capital (Romero Castro et al., 2023), these "I-Turners", or what Otowa (2020) calls "alternative Japanese", can be broadly categorized as *iryuusha* (people from 'elsewhere' including non-Japanese residents) and are commonly demarcated into sustainers, those who help maintain the community status-quo, and innovators, those who introduce new ideas or economic activities into the locale (Obikwelu et al., 2018; Otowa, 2020; Research Institute for Sustainable Community Company, n.d.; Yamaguchi, 2022).

I-Turners, including foreign or foreign-Japanese household owners of JVBH, often bring innovations that they *feel* will benefit the community while also seeking, and occasionally struggling, to integrate into an environment that may not be open to such an influx of new ideas, as beneficial as they may seem to be. I-Turners are generally not motivated by any real or perceived connection with the target community, instead seeking alternatives to urban life, which may be informed by romantic notions of more eco-friendly lifestyles, so-called "slow life", and connecting with Japan's rural past.

3. Methodology

3.1. Architectural Phenomenology

For the purposes of this inquiry, a direct contribution from phenomenology is made through what the author refers to as *architectural phenomenology* (Figure 2). As Aravof (2009) notes in the preface to *Invitation to ArchiPhen: Some Approaches and Interpretations of Phenomenology in Architecture*, phenomenology is the study of human experience rooted in the first-person perspective—a life-world that seeks shared cognition and intersubjectivity. Aravof (2009) elaborates that architecture projects experiences yet to be realized, representing a form of "phenomenology in practice," while cautioning that "architecture is a creative art, a praxis, not a philosophy."

Echoing Tanizaki, Baltazar dos Santos (2009) suggests that the essence of a building is embedded in its design, existing, prior to construction, in a state defined by both determinism and indeterminism. Earlier, Steven Holl (2000; as cited in Yorgancıoğlu, 2009) expressed a similar view, describing built structures as physical materializations of conceptual forces—“interwoven landscapes” that bridge abstraction and materiality through form, space, light, and color.

In Japan, particularly among the cultural actors detailed below, material and technique are considered vital to rehabilitating built heritage. Architectural phenomenology is evident in traditional Japanese design elements such as *koyagumi* (beams and trusses), *engawa* (veranda), and *tokonoma* (alcove), which emphasize spatial experiences that shift based on user interaction.

Field observations took place between April 23–24, 2022, during the First Annual Minka Summit in Hanse, Kyoto Prefecture (Kominka Japan, n.d.) which brought together artisans, carpenters, preservation experts, property owners, and others interested in Japan’s vernacular built heritage (JVBH), including *minka*/*kominka* (farmhouses), *machiya* (townhouses), and *kura* (warehouses).

The event featured a "Minka Mall" with businesses and organizations involved in traditional roofing, carpentry, organic farming, and non-profit conservation efforts. A series of presentations, which I helped organize as a volunteer, covered topics such as construction techniques, valuation of JVBH and *akiya* (abandoned homes), and strategies for community integration. The organizers supported my research by promoting it at the event and through their social media. Although time constraints limited interactions, the conversations that did occur reflected interest in the study and a willingness to engage further.

Stage	Phenomenological Method	Architectural Phenomenology
1	*Époche* , natural attitude	*Époche* , bracketing of established architectural forms; interpretations, generalizations
2	Phenomenological reduction	Phenomenological reduction, fresh, unconditioned understanding of context, project, process, and so on
3	Essence or edios, what makes a “thing” a “thing”, bare essence	Free variations, purpose, context, historical circumstances, ad hoc essence
4	Intersubjective corroboration	Grasping the meaning of the ad hoc essence
5		Intersubjective corroboration Share findings with peers, community, client?

(Figure 2: architectural phenomenology summarized by the author)

3.2. Cultural Altruism

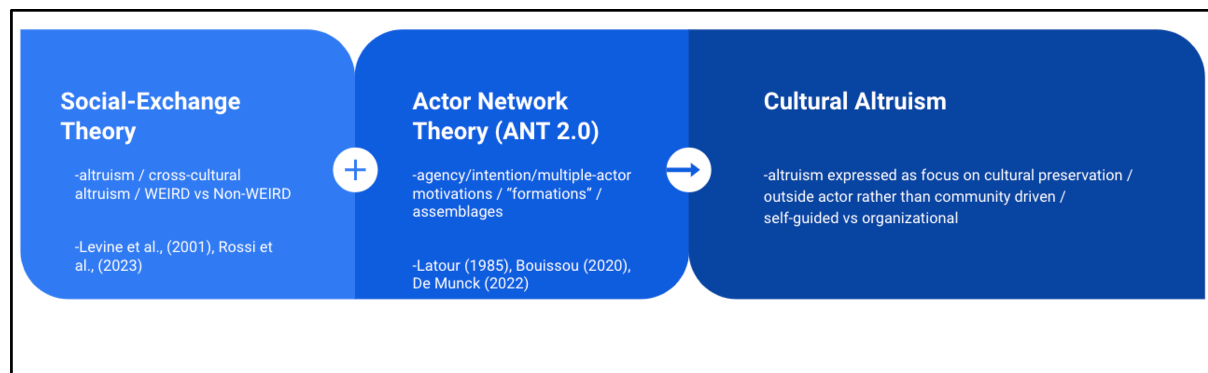
Altruism, the act of helping others out of a genuine concern or desire to render aid without expectation of reciprocation, and it's alter-ego reciprocal altruism, or altruism with the expectation of some sort return at a later date, has been the subject of much research under the umbrella of Social Exchange Theory (Grönlund, 2013; Levine et al., 2001; Smelser, 2001) In a more specific Japanese context, Jean-Marie Bouissou’s *Les leçons du Japon - Un pays très incorrect,* particularly his assertion that Japanese “form a society” while the French (or the “West”) “form a body”, gives insight into differing approaches to cooperation, volunteerism, and social order (Boniface, 2019; Bouissou, 2020).

Cultural altruism, however, is conceptualized as an attempt to bridge a space in existing notions of altruism (assistance without expectation of reciprocation), by attempting to define the role of an actor’s desire to offer aid in service of culturally-focused objectives (save or preserve an aspect of the culture perceived to be at risk of decline or disappearance), regardless of the level of need or inclination within the host community (Figure 3). In this sense,

cultural altruism was derived as a synthesis of social exchange theory, cross-cultural altruism (Levine et al., 2001), contrasts between WEIRD (Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, Democratic) and "non-WEIRD" cultures or regions (Rossi et al., 2023), which itself draws inspiration from Bouissou's "formations" (Bouissou, 2020), but with the added aspects of self-interest and focus; the desire to help preserve, protect, or promulgate a given cultural artefact, practice or tradition as a main motivation for an actor or network, in this case foreign or foreign-Japanese household-owners of Japanese Vernacular Built Heritage (JVBH). As one respondent succinctly put it regarding Japanese traditional residences, "You know, they're falling apart and getting torn down and maybe we could save one".

As a proposed subset of I-Turners, the cultural altruist is not necessarily motivated, at least not principally, by nostalgic or lifestyle-infused objectives of a typical U or I-Turner, therefore lying outside typical actor-network interactions of this type. Due to the relative ease of dismantling and transport, on occasion, *minka* have been removed from their original location and rebuilt elsewhere, including outside of Japan, which, while preserving the heritage unit itself, removes a cultural asset from its host setting (K. Bengs, personal communication, July 20, 2017; Toda Koumuten, 2021).

As the predominant focal point is the built heritage structure itself, cultural altruism exerts a higher degree of self-interest, even including removal of the building from the host community as noted above, than other official "turner" narratives (S. Holden, personal communication, January 19, 2024), to the extent that on occasion they may act as disruptors of a community's genius loci and any attendant use-values. Bachura (personal communication, January 19, 2024) somewhat disputes this, arguing that while cultural altruism can account for certain buyer motivations, the interest in pursuing such projects lies more in economic (*perceived* affordability) and less tangible, soft-power defined underpinnings drawing more upon Japanese cultural exports such as anime, design, or traditional aesthetics, and thus the prospective owner is less invested in the locality itself beyond these factors. Holden (personal communication, January 19, 2024), moreover, is careful to note that altruism must also be situated alongside the project initiator's curiosity in the structure itself and wider culture around it, as well as a certain level of desire to pursue less well-tread socio-economic paths.



(Figure 3: Cultural Altruism Conceptual Model)

3.3. Choice Compression

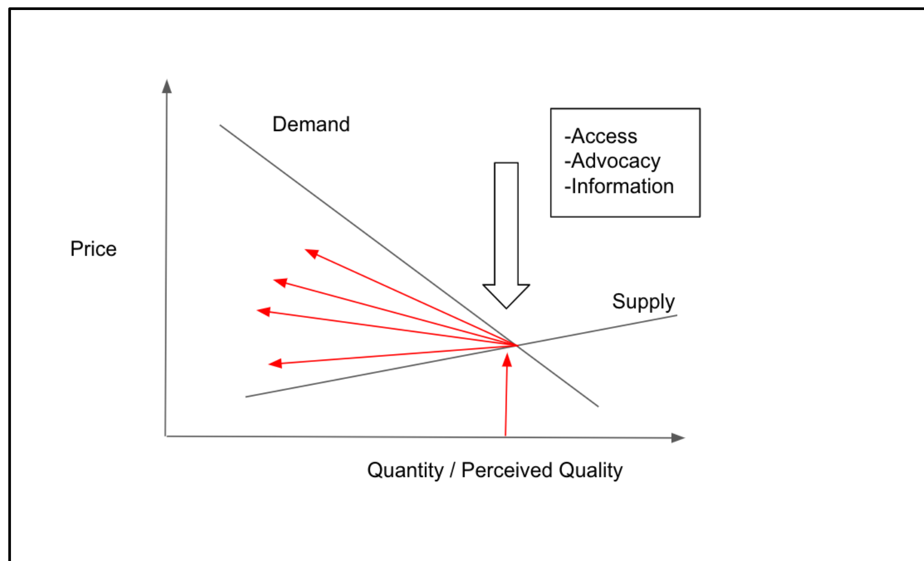
Scarcity, or scarcity credibility, is primarily an economic term which may be simply summarized as "the less of something, the more valuable it is" (Galloway, 2022). Goldsmith et al. (2020) detail four types of scarcity: "scarcity as a mindset", "scarcity as a threat", "scarcity as a reference point", and "scarcity as a journey". Regardless of the type of scarcity, the effects on the market and consumer behaviour are essentially predicated on "normal" economic conditions such as supply and demand, perceived opportunities and threats, or aspirational objectives such as a desire to showcase a higher status and even FOMO (Fear Of Missing Out) (Galloway, 2022; Goldsmith et al., 2020; Kaufman, 2020; Shi et al., 2020). If this is reset into a built heritage environment, historic structures can often command higher price points by virtue of their rarity, authenticity, architectural provenance, and even previous residents of the property, which is known as heritage premium.

What conventional notions of scarcity somewhat lack, is solving for a supply of housing or building stock that continues to increase either through new builds or vacancies, while demand for new builds in larger urban areas is ever present despite rising prices, a declining population and decreasing consumer spending power (Brasor, 2021;

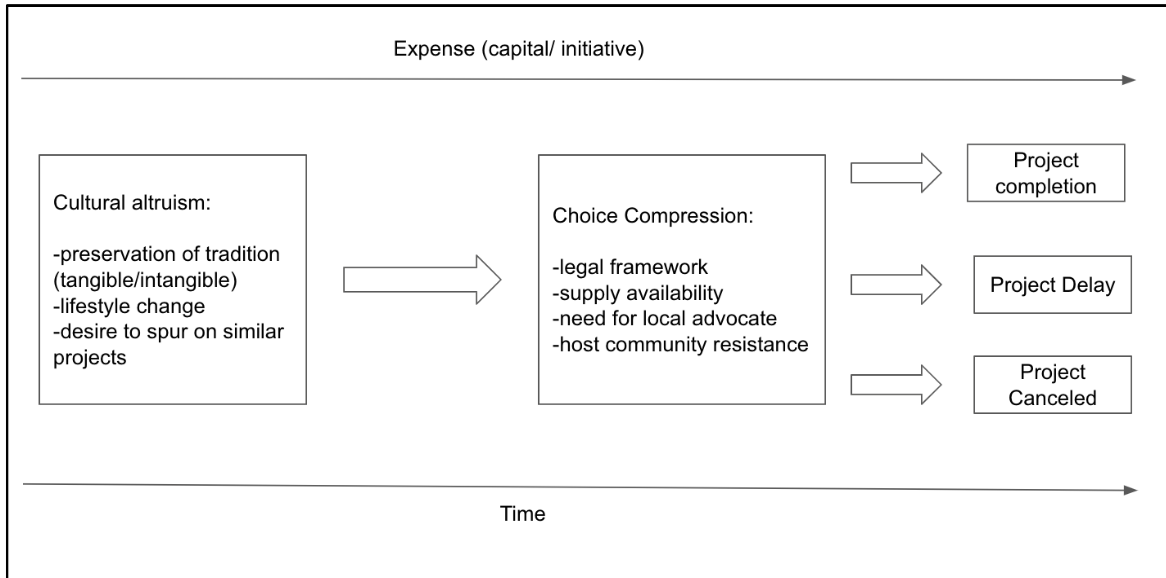
Brasor & Tsubuku, 2022; Katz, 2021; OECD, 2017). So, while one would expect a plentiful supply of cheap, readily available *minka*, *machiya* or *kura* to be found as supply far exceeds demand, due to certain social, economic and legal constraints the opposite is true in many cases, leading to an oversupply of difficult to secure so-called "B" properties, counterbalanced by a much smaller minority of "A", or sound structures available for immediate purchase but largely without the attendant heritage premium price point (Brasor & Tsukubu, 2023; Kamata, 2022).

Therefore, scarcity, as defined in a rational economic context, does not quite fit the current situation in relation to JVBH, particularly *minka*, hence the formulation of "choice compression", which can be framed as "scarcity as an opportunity".

Choice compression shares some commonalities with "scarcity as a journey" as detailed above, but with several important departures (Figure 4). The first is the compression, or bottleneck, in supply is not producer or market driven (i.e. supply and demand), but rather legal-structural-cultural-informational in nature, and therefore commands a premium in terms of time and expense (initiative/expense) but, relative to the overall domestic housing market, not in *initial* price point. The second is choice compression is largely consumer directed, (scarcity as an opportunity) and subject to more intangible (culturally altruistic) factors such as a desire to aid rural revitalization, a "quieter" lifestyle, or the real or perceived historical quality of the structure, rather than tangibles (ROI, properties as an investment vehicle, annual yield) although both Bachura, (personal communication, January 19, 2024) and Holden (personal communication, January 19, 2024) caution against discounting the roles of interest in the host culture, generally through cultural exports such as entertainment or cuisine, and affinity, real or perceived, with the relevant locality. However, for the most part, it is the contention of this inquiry that choice compression as defined here, as well as culturally altruistic defined motivations, which are explored in more detail below, remains the dominant mode of engagement with these extant *minka* properties, host communities, and relevant markets (Figure 5).



(Figure 4: Choice compression, as conceived in this study, is influenced by non-market factors)(source: by author)

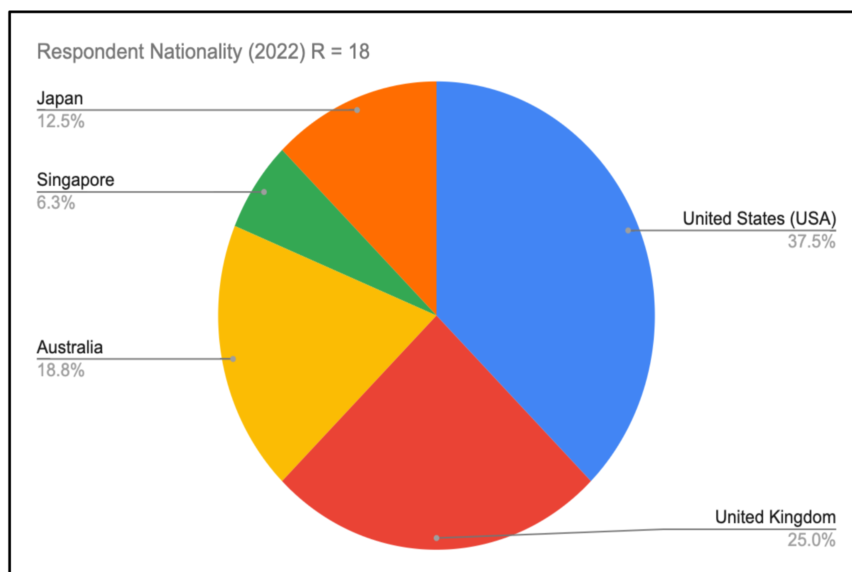


(Figure 5: Cultural altruism interactions with choice compression in JVBH (minka) reuse/reclamation projects)(source: by author)

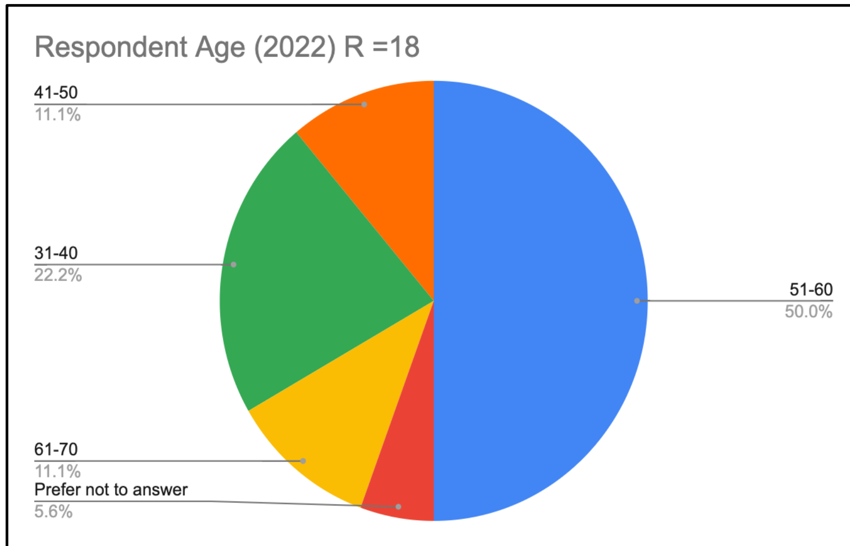
The decision by a potential owner of a Japanese historic property to embark upon the process to purchase and rehabilitate a built heritage structure will be informed by several motivational factors. This study sought to explore to what extent individuals engaging in such projects balanced interest almost exclusively in the unique design elements of the building (referred to above as cultural altruism), as echoed in the work of Baltazar dos Santos (2009) and Holl (2000; as cited in Yorgancioglu, 2009) with an emphasis on design as the essential element or giver of meaning to a given structure, with other considerations such as locale, community, or perceived economic opportunity. Furthermore, this inquiry sought to clarify to what extent the role of distinctive Japanese market factors, namely non-market constraints, or choice compression, played in the pursuit and overall success of the project.

4. Results

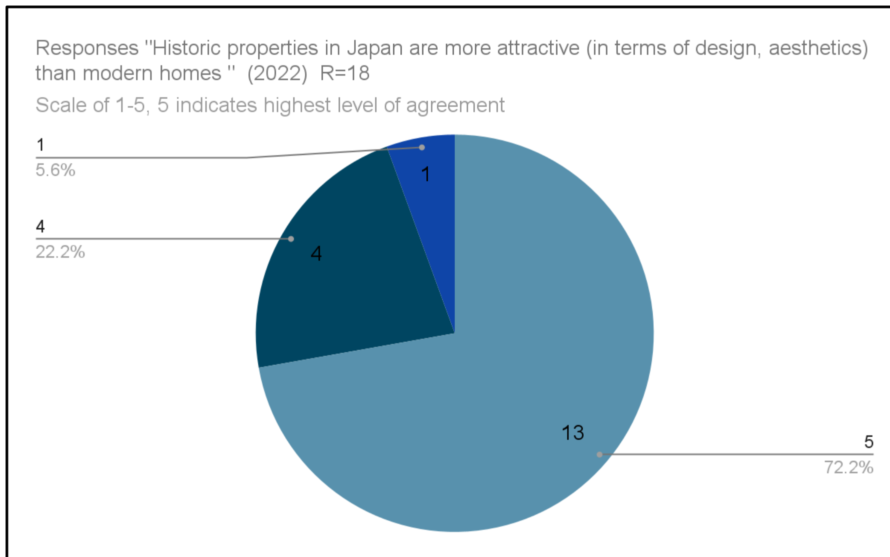
Where the owner-respondent cohort differed was in age-range, typically trending much older than typical "I-Turners" (Figures 6 and 7), industry (largely creative or touristic rather than farming), and, as will be illustrated in more depth below, noted as a primary motivator, culturally altruistic notions related to Japanese built heritage aesthetics, conservation and preservation, and sustainability (Figures 8 and 9).



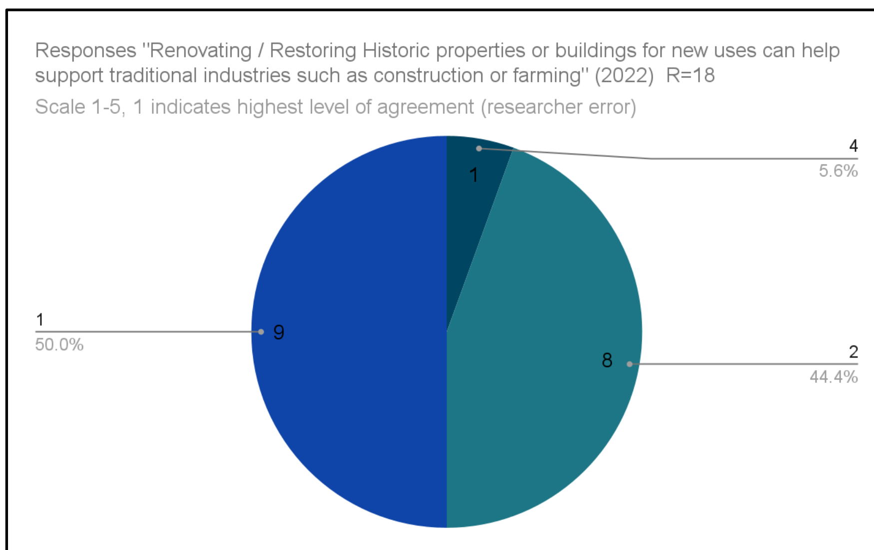
(Figure 6: Respondents by nationality) (source: by authors)



(Figure 7: Respondents by age group) (source: by authors)



(Figure 8: Preferances by property type) (source: by authors)



(Figure 9: Respondents' thoughts on how adaptive reuse of JVBH can aid revitalization at the local level) (source: by authors)

5. Discussion

5.1. Respondent Profiles

There are, however, a series of necessary caveats to make before proceeding further within this monograph. Unfortunately, it must be acknowledged that the cohort of owner-respondents amounted to 19, which was far lower than was hoped for, while other versions designed for industry professionals (carpenters, real estate agents, relevant officials) and prospective owners returned even lower responses.

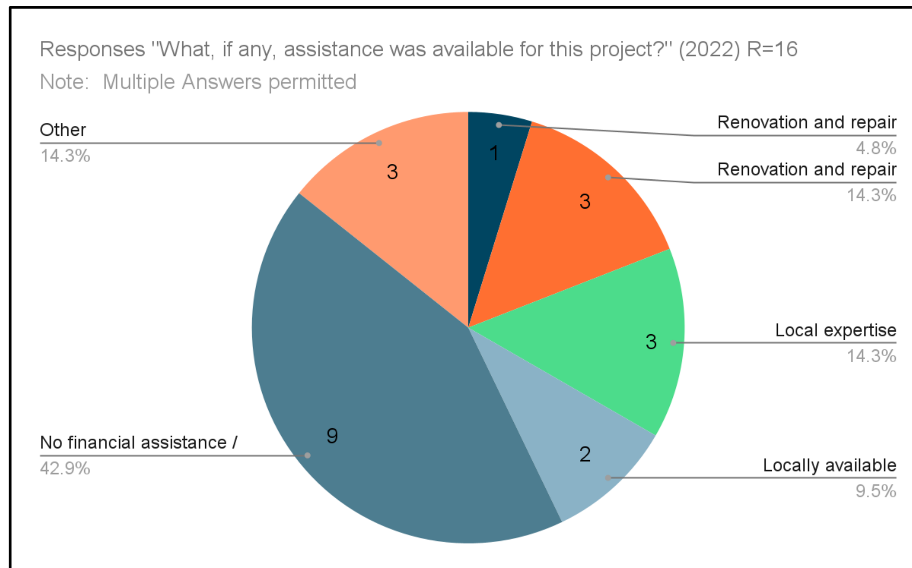
Furthermore, within this pool of returned questionnaires, the number of Japanese version responses was regrettably so small as to be rendered inapplicable to the study (Table 1). As detailed above, only three follow-up video interviews, two foreign *minka* owners and one foreign prospective owner (all are long-term residents), were able to be scheduled in late summer 2022. The small response cohort, while relatively geographically diverse, was nonetheless heavily weighted toward a relatively homogeneous foreign, or foreign-Japanese household, owner-respondents resulted in a a re-orientation of this inquiry's outline towards a focus on a wider examination of, amongst other subject areas, *minka* (or *kominka*) as inhabiting a wide variety of heritage use values, how their adaptive reuse could form a strategy for increased sustainability in the housing/construction market, what the challenges in procuring a minka teaches about the regulatory and socio-cultural environment in which these structures reside, and how foreign owners interact and intersect through these areas as viewed through a multi-theoretical lens as outlined above.

Version	English Version Responses	Japanese Version Responses
Owner	18	1
Prospective Owner	2	2
Industry	2	1

(Table 1: Breakdown of questionnaire return results, Spring-Summer 2022)

5.2. Respondent Motivations

What emerges is commonalities centred on tangible aspects of the structure such as materials, design, providence and state of repair at time of purchase, as well as intangible aspects such as community relations or integration, authenticity, and economic considerations particularly financing the initial purchase and subsequent maintenance and renovation work (Figure 10). Moreover, respondents were largely drawn from the ideal cohort for such regenerative projects, entrepreneurial, passionate about Japanese-built heritage, committed to rural revitalization, and displaying a high level of cultural awareness, who were nevertheless realistic about the barriers faced in embarking on such projects. As Kamata (2022) noted, finding the right person or persons who can take effective action is key, very much in line with Bachura (personal communication, January 19, 2024) as well as, more broadly Katz (2022), who states at a national level Japan has consistently missed opportunities in terms of new economic models such as start-ups or sanctioning decentralizing work options through remote solutions, particularly in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic.



(Figure 10: Respondent results in regard to assistance available for built heritage projects)

A central pillar to rural revitalization is the restoration of communities through primarily socio-economic initiatives, which Romero-Castro et al. (2023) highlight as rural entrepreneurship (RE). City Nation Place (2020) notes how in Cammarata, Italy, a program also offers homes for free, but with the caveat that renovation plans must be submitted in advance to preserve the historic cityscape. This nevertheless allows young people or families to get a foothold in the property market. Also instructive is the case of Idanha-a-Nova, Portugal, which after experiencing a 70% population loss, pivoted to marketing itself as a rural-innovative destination by engaging their city-based diaspora, a strategy that would seem tailor-made for Japanese rural localities who have seen a steady migration away from their communities to major cities for several decades (City Nation Place, 2020; National Institute of Population and Social Security Research, n.d.; Otowa, 2020).

5.3. Policy Implications

As Kinoshita (2017) notes "Big, shiny, new developments are no longer a formula for success", a sentiment echoed by Brasor and Tsubuku (2023), who estimate approximately ¥8 million will be needed per household to finance mandatory condominium (so called "tower mansions", some of the big, shiny developments Kinoshita is referring to) renovations, putting the required financial inputs for JVBH projects into a very different perspective. Ost and Saleh (2022) also note that there is a difficulty in resolving the tensions between co-creation values, such as improving Quality of Life (QoL) through sustainable growth, and co-destruction values, such as gentrification, overcrowding or opportunity cost in adaptive reuse or rehabilitation projects which can lead officials to choose the path of least resistance (i.e. new developments). Moreover, current U/I-Turn models are based around singular solutions such as farming, opening a touristic asset, or even a work from home office/space, which Romero Castor et al. (2023) caution avoid realistically assessing real-world phenomena such as migration movements, infrastructure shortfalls and other factors. Ultimately, there is a need for better, and more honest, marketing and branding of built heritage assets like extant *minka* and *kura* in service of national revitalization and soft power objectives, particularly in terms of required timeframes, nation branding for the long-term, and place making in the short-term (Kaufman, 2020; Melewar et al., 2013) and more effective channels to source JVBH and visit the communities in which they reside. As Streefland (2021) correctly states, "Facts don't change our minds. Experiences do".

6. Conclusion

Traditional Japanese buildings embody *genius loci* (spirit of place) through spatial experience, esthesis and catharsis, and the material (tangible/visible) and the immaterial (ephemeral/intangible) (Čepaitienė, 2015), becoming an ideal movement attractor of human and socio-economic flow (Arbara, 2022) for cohorts similar to the study group examined in this study.

As Brown (2022) and Kerr (2022), have stated, the Japanese real estate industry, and public at large, fails to see the desirability of historical structures, promoting an image of these buildings as outmoded, uncomfortable homes or places for businesses even as foreign interest, in the form of tourists or cultural altruists, continues to increase (Alexander, 2017, 2021; Chappell, 2015; Kawai, 2018). While tourists value built or cultural heritage as an attraction or experiential location, as illustrated above, cultural altruists value the asset in and of itself to the point where considerations of place, community, or other intangibles may be placed as secondary in their motivations. Kinoshita (2017) has previously noted "Big, shiny, new developments are no longer a formula for success", a sentiment echoed by Brasor and Tsubuku (2023), who estimate approximately ¥8 million will be needed per household to finance mandatory condominium (so called "tower mansions", some of the big, shiny developments Kinoshita is referring to) renovations, putting the required financial inputs for JVBH projects into a very different perspective. Ost and Saleh (2022) also note that there is a difficulty in resolving the tensions between co-creation values, such as improving Quality of Life (QoL) through sustainable growth, and co-destruction values, such as gentrification, overcrowding or opportunity cost in adaptive reuse or rehabilitation projects which can lead officials to choose the path of least resistance (i.e. new developments). Moreover, current U/I-Turn models are based around singular solutions such as farming, opening a restaurant or hotel, or even a work from home office/space, which Romero Castor et al. (2023) caution avoid realistically assessing real-world phenomena such as migration movements, infrastructure shortfalls and other factors. While not unimportant, a virtuous economic cycle requires projects with longer-term direct and induced outcomes (what economists call second-order or downstream effects). As was seen in the COVID-19 pandemic, tourism is highly vulnerable to geopolitical developments (UNWTO, 2023), so a "virtuous mix" of traditional industries, start-ups, educational training, tourism, and other models would represent the HBU for such projects and their host communities.

This inquiry is a glimpse of a motivated, generally foreign or foreign-Japanese household cohort which defies the general, government and industry-led trend to favour new builds over older, "inconvenient" residences or commercial buildings. These notions are exacerbated by lauding contradictions in large urban centres such as Maki et al. (2018), where singular hints of tradition such as houseplants in front of an office tower or bamboo *sudare* on the balconies of concrete block apartment buildings, are celebrated rather than critiqued for the built environment which hosts these artefacts and the people within. Egusquiza et al. (2022) continues along this line of inquiry, stating that by employing systematic, transparent interventions to built heritage "affordable comfort is possible…(making it) likely to be inhabited and consequently conserved" although Broome (2021) and Gonchar (2021) caution for a need to consider emotional ties to the original design, as well as notions like acoustic warmth, the optimal decibel level for the intended use, and to avoid misguided maintenance and unsympathetic modifications. Nevertheless, Bullen (2007) assures that "Generally an adapted building will not completely match a new building in terms of performance, although the shortfall should be balanced against gains in social value" while Burchard (2021) implores that "Existing buildings are full of risk and opportunity", which represent embodied carbon sinks, collective memory, and *unreproducible craft* (italics mine).

More effective strategies are needed to find commonality between the cultural altruist, the U-Turner, the I-Turner, and local stakeholders that go beyond current modes of tradition for tradition's sake. As noted above, cultural altruism may inform individual heritage preservation intentions, but ancillary benefits to the wider community will not necessarily be given priority as the built heritage asset itself is the main objective of the undertaking. To cut across differences in experience, objectives, and indeed language, a recognition is needed of the issue at hand, declining rural communities and the loss of the cultural heritage which they host, and what each group can contribute and where there will be a need for compromise. It is unrealistic for a community association to expect foreign, or indeed younger Japanese, new residents to "do things the way they've always been done", in the process restraining much-needed innovation and entrepreneurship vital to revitalizing the community, while simultaneously hastening its demise. Conversely, new arrivals would need to be cognisant of the need to merge tradition with modernity or risk losing what one presumes were the original USPs to engage in the move or JVBH project in the first place. Both parties would need to more honestly address the opportunities, the open windows, that JVBH can offer in terms of local regeneration strategies, such as new businesses, expansion of local services, and a more secure long-term future for the community, but also the risks, most importantly, of the inevitable changes to local cultural practices that will occur.

Ultimately, Japan and Japanese citizens must start to recognise JVBH are "infrastructures for memory" (sic) that ties the past to the present and more importantly, unique historical environments are, in fact, an exhaustible resource (Leeks & Cole, 2017; Nesticò & Somma, 2019) and in need of conservation.

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This study was conducted independently and did not involve any procedures requiring formal institutional ethics approval. All participants were informed about the nature of the research and participated voluntarily. No personally identifiable information was collected, and all data were gathered anonymously. The research was carried out in accordance with recognized ethical standards and posed no risk to participants.

Conflict of interest:

The author declares that there is no competing interest.

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