# The struggle to belong
## *Dealing with diversity in 21st century urban settings.*

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**Alternative forms of housing for the elderly in Japan and their role of creating new places of encounter between older and younger people in urban neighbourhoods**

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**Abstract**

Elderly people – although certainly not marginal in a quantitative sense – tend to be marginalized in modern societies. The ageing of Japan's society, the growing share of elderly people coinciding with a change of family structure and function has resulted in a sharp decrease of the traditional three-generation households in the last few decades. The share of institutional housing has been growing but is criticized widely for not providing sufficient quality of life and leading to an exclusion of the elderly from society. In recent years, however, a number of alternative forms of living have emerged that enable elderly people to live independently from institutions, similar to communal forms of living of elderly people in Western societies. Apart from forming small size communities of about ten older people who share common rooms such as kitchen and living room, these houses also often aim tat integrating elderly people into the community at the same time providing space for a wide range of activities thus creating new opportunities of encounters for different generations within neighbourhood communities.

Based on onsite research and interviews with residents and organizers of communal forms of living this paper aims to analyse how the integration of different generations is achieved and how it promotes interaction between different generations in neighbourhoods.

## 1. Introduction

The ageing of Japan's society, which has advanced rapidly since the 1970s resulted in 23.1 per cent of Japan's population being aged 65 and above (almost 30 million in absolute numbers) and 11.2 per cent being aged 75 and above (Cabinet Office Statistical Bureau 2010). The growing share of elderly people coincides with a change of family structure and function and has resulted in a sharp decrease in traditional three-generation households during the last few decades. The share of institutional housing has been growing but is criticized widely for not providing sufficient quality of life and leading to an exclusion of the elderly from society. In recent years a number of alternative forms of living have emerged in Japan that enable elderly people to live independently from institutions and their families, similar to communal forms of living of elderly people in Western societies. In Japan, the emergence of this kind of housing is to some extent unexpected, because it interferes with the norms concerning older people's lives that still seem to prevail. Although steeply declining, living with one's children has remained the norm while the rising numbers of elderly only households (older people living on their own, alone or as couples) are regarded as problematic, although they account for more than half of the living arrangements of older people (MHLW 2008).

Communal forms of living for elderly people in Japan form small size communities of about ten people who share common rooms such as kitchen and living room. These often provide an infrastructure of support and help services frequently (but not necessarily) provided by non-profit organizations, taking into account that frailties and ailments are more likely to occur with growing age, which can be made

use of if required and which seems to reassure the residents as well as their families that the communal houses are safe places to live in old age. Historically, they have two sources, one goes back to welfare measures for older people living on their own introduced by local authorities in snowy and remote regions in the 1970s and again after the Kobe Earthquake in 1995 as a means to accommodate elderly people who had lost their homes. Alternative housing projects for the elderly that are not part of public housing schemes but organised privately have been built in a significantly increasing number since the end of the 1990s (Sasaki 2000: 3, 7–12).[1] According to the organizers – who are residents themselves in a number of cases – the most important aim of this kind of housing is to create a living environment, in which the residents can live in accordance with their individual preferences. Another aim of these houses frequently mentioned is to integrate elderly people into the community and at the same time providing space for a wide range of activities thus creating new opportunities of encounters for different generations within neighbourhood communities. How this works is the subject of this paper, which is based on on-site research and interviews with residents and organizers of communal forms of living for older people.

## 2. Marginalization of older people in Japan

Elderly people – although certainly not marginal in a quantitative sense – tend to be marginalized in modern societies: People who have completed their working lives are perceived as useless for an industrialized society. Japan is no exception; while the causes and the ways may be similar in many respects, some presumably go back to cultural circumstances specific to Japan. However, research also seems to suggest that older people's status in post-industrialized societies has gradually improved (Cox 1990). Whether this holds true for Japan requires further investigation. The examples given here may be hinting at a change. In the West, Japan is often perceived as a country in which older people are highly respected. As proof the seniority principle in companies and politics is quoted as well as the high percentage of people over 65 in the workforce and a tradition that is said to be based on Confucian principles and Shintoist ancestor worship among others (cf. Formanek 2009). Moreover, public social expenditure directed towards older people in relation to expenditure directed towards children/families favours elderly people in all OECD countries. However, this especially applies to Japan with expenditure nine times higher for older people (OECD Social Expenditure Database (SOCX) 2007).

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1        The non-profit organization law of 1998 and the introduction of the public long-term care insurance in 2000 had an important impact on the emergence of alternative housing projects.

Erdman Palmore, one of the outstanding researchers of ageism, e.g. takes an extremely positive view on the perception of Japan's old age generation in his book on Japan *The honorable elders* (1975; 1985 [revised edition with Maeda, D.]). Palmore especially emphasizes and highly values the way in which elderly people in Japan are cared for in their families. All these factors are supposed to result in the elderly being socially integrated to a much greater extent than in western societies. Cultural studies have, however, provided us with a much more diverse role of old age in Japan during its history (cf. Formanek 2009).

In the 1970s, when Japan's so-called "elderly people problem" (*rōjin mondai*) (= the increasing share of older people and its feared impact on the welfare system) became an often discussed topic especially due the fact that caused by urbanization the percentage of elderly people in rural areas had sharply risen while the nuclearization of the family was advancing in the cities (Kawabata 2001: 46–47). Since the 1980s some Japanese sociologists pointed to the negative perception of the elderly in Japan. They criticized the stereotypes of old age consisting of frailties and disabilities not acknowledging the heterogeneity in this age group, which had led to the perception of elderly people as a social problem. Most of all they disapproved of the stereotype also adhered to by older people that people of old age would inevitably require help and support. Not the individual situation and preferences would be in the centre of concern, but the view, that all people over a certain age as a rule needed help, which families are responsible for according to the norms. According to Sugii (2007: 546; cf. Soeda 1978) respect for the elderly was a respect for the subjects of the past, but not for the present individuals, which resulted in a pejorative view of older people. Hashimoto (1996) emphasises that it was not respect of old age that has made children care for their parents and led to the high percentage of three generation-households, but a socially internalized sense of responsibility (socialization, social norms), whether there was the need for care or not. Thus, a simplified image of old age is constructed making older people to dependent objects of care without any own right of decision-making and responsibilities and self-exclusion on the side of the older people. As a result families, the younger and the older generation, are under strong pressure to fulfil their perceived duties.[2]

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2       Moreover, there had not been an alternative before fundamental changes to the welfare system were implemented in the 1990s (the so-called Gold Plan) and the introduction of the public long-term care insurance and the following rapid increase in the diversity of care institutions, which in turn have led to a less stigmatized view of professional care institutions.

Various surveys on parent-child relations, on "happiness" of older people living with or without their children and even on suicide rates seem to support this hypothesis: To be a burden to their children is one of the main reasons for suicide along with depression and other health conditions and socio-economic reasons (Cabinet Office 2007). In fact, only in cases in which the household income is above average living with the family has a positive effect on their perception of happiness (Iwai 2007: 67–69).[3] To be a burden to their children is also one of the main reasons for the search for alternative forms of living.

## 3. Communal housing

Having tried to explain how social marginalization of older people works in Japan, I will continue with a description of activities of a number of communal houses that aim at the integration of the residents and older people in general and, following the above reasoning concerning marginalization, aim at turning older people into self-determined subjects. As in other societies, old people's homes have been built at the outskirts of the cities – making discrimination visible in terms of space – due to land prices as well as the fear of neighbourhood protests. Neighbours seem to be especially concerned with older people suffering from dementia and the fear of loss of property values in their neighbourhood. Gerontologists, however, have criticised the policy of providing large scale institutions and to place elderly people at the edges of cities, thus removing them from their familiar surroundings. NPOs and older people themselves (as well as some local communities) have started to create their own small-size homes mostly located in residential neighbourhoods. There is a range of variations from some having an infrastructure quite similar to old people's homes to completely individualized places making it difficult to generalize. Because they usually stick to a size of plus-minus ten people they are very homelike, which is also supported by the fact that there are not many rules concerning wake-up times or meals that can usually be found in institutions of elderly care. Support staff, if present, does only support the residents when requested (or necessary due to serious health concerns).

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3        Violence against older family members has become a problem officially recognized. A law for the prevention of violence against the elderly came into effect in 2006. Surveys on the situation and supporting measures have been introduced by the Ministry for Health, Labour and Welfare. Cf. http://www.mhlw.go.jp/topics/kaigo/boushi/060424/index.html (accessed 24 May 2011). According to surveys of the Japanese government only 5% of those people aged 65 plus having committed suicides had lived alone. The greatest share is among those living with their family (Cabinet Office 2007).

The way communal houses make a difference within the community can be classified in the following ways:

- incidental encounters / organized activities
- organized by one or more residents / by a supporting group of non-residents / by neighbours and others
- aim at specific age groups / at a broader public
- are one-time events / take place regularly

In the following, some examples are given. Some of the houses have restaurants on the ground floors managed by workers' collectives. They have a separate entrance thus not interfering with the living space, but easily to reach for the residents and accessible to anybody who passes by and frequently used by a variety of people. As the houses are located within residential areas (not the places many people pass by coincidentally), the visitors are usually more or less aware of the kind of place the restaurants are part of. Thus, the houses are not isolated within the neighbourhood, they become part of the local infrastructure and places of communication, placed in-between neutral public spaces and the private living space. A similar effect of incidental encounters is achieved by the integration of other "business" into the same building: a paediatric surgery in one case and an afternoon school for children of elementary school age in another.

While institutions of elder care tend to organize events such as concerts for their residents (and, sometimes, their families or as a promotion event), in communal houses events are organized of course for the residents but often as well for the neighbourhood or everybody else interested. Often a supporting non-profit organization (which can of course include residents) plans events and activities. But also the residents themselves become involved in the organization of activities. The same is true for regular activities such as a choir in one house and the "needlework club" (where the older people teach the younger) in the other. One of the residents started a karaoke aerobics group meeting weekly.

Receiving public funding, some organize regular activities in their rooms for people aged 60 and above such as gymnastics, thus providing places of encounters for older people. At one house, children of a nearby school are involved in taking care of flowerbeds, a formally organized part of their school curriculum. After having got to know the place and its residents, the house has become familiar to the

children and some drop in occasionally. Starting a business (one house has decided to grow herbs as an ingredient and to produce hand-made soap) is another approach.

## 4. Concluding remarks

As a result one may say that communal forms of housing aim at being open in contrast to the closed and isolated conventional old people's homes sometimes still resembling the "total institutions" in Goffman's sense. Different from retirement villages, they are usually located in an average age-heterogeneous surrounding. Even if the residents in the houses are primarily for older people only (among them some still holding regular jobs), the location as well as the architecture allow incidental encounters with neighbours and others. Additionally, by the means of events or activities or the provision of space for activities the houses reach out into the community. They are easily accessible to all interested For older people in the neighbourhood some houses function as places of information concerning questions or problems they may have. In contrast to conventional old people's homes, whose residents often try to conceal their place of living (Bethel 1992: 131), residents of communal housing usually feel confident about the place they live in. Some of my interviewees like to invite their friends who are curious about this new way of living. Residents of the houses have the chance to become active themselves and in doing so denying the perception of passive and stereotyped old age. "No one type of housing […] can satisfy the diversification and heterogeneity of the rapidly expanding older population (Grant 2007: 103)." Communal houses expand the range of housing older people can choose. They allow older people to live in accordance with their own preferences and needs, but they also have the effect that older people stay within neighbourhoods, being visible for their neighbours. It may also be an important factor that not too many older people are concentrated in one place as is the case with large scale institutions . This could have a encouraging effect on the neighbourhood. Moreover, the people in communal houses tend to be relatively healthy making the acceptance by the neighbourhood easier. I should also qualify the argumentation by saying that so far, mostly residents and organizers as well as participants in activities have been asked on their view. A broader survey in the respective neighbourhoods could generate more precise results of the effects of communal housing on neighbourhood communities.

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