

**The Architecture of Art Projects in Japan**  
**Submitted by Simone Shu-Yeng Chung Ph.D. (Cantab.)**

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Against the backdrop of severe depopulation and a rapidly aging society, compounded by the precarity of living spurred by environmental disasters and employment instability, this scholarly research considers the enabling role of architecture at the margins, in relation to the rise of alternative spaces and local citizenry across Japan. The aforementioned prevailing conditions are most acutely felt in smaller cities and rural towns, although urban suburbs of major cities including Tokyo are increasingly affected. The catastrophic events of 3-11 affected profound social changes and prompted the architectural community to foreground social obligations over professional ambitions. Design projects and community initiatives that exemplify such efforts have been the focus of architecture showcased over this decade, such as the “Architecture Possible Here? Home-for-all” with Ito Toyoo serving as commissioner and “En: Art of Nexus” exhibitions for the Japan Pavilion at the 2012 and 2016 Venice Biennale respectively, “Architecture after 3.11” at the 21st Century Museum of Contemporary Art in Kanazawa in 2014/15 and a special themed issue of *The Japan Architect* in 2016 featuring inventive small-scale regeneration projects by young architects and practices.

Since 1990, what are widely referred to as “art projects”, transliterated as *āto purojekuto* (アート・プロジェクト) in Japanese, are flourishing across Japan (Kumakura 2015). From a policy perspective, The Basic Act on the Promotion of Culture and the Arts enacted in 2001 has played a pivotal part in the last decade. Art projects refer to art-related initiatives held outside traditional museum and gallery spaces; instead, activities take place across various sites and purposefully employ the process of art-making and other forms of convivial creative tasks to engage a range of participants besides artists. In lieu of formal cultural institutions, art projects utilise old houses, decommissioned factories and more recently, defunct public buildings such as libraries and schools. Another main feature of art projects is the sustained, active participation of neighbourhood residents and local volunteers (and in the case of high-profile art festivals, from abroad) collectively recognised as local citizens. This new form of citizenry emerged in response to Japan’s shrinking society pandemic which has profoundly impacted policies adopted by local, prefectural and even national government. The acute shift in the country’s demographics has concurrently resulted in the depopulation of smaller cities and urban suburbs outside Tokyo’s centre. Strategic socioeconomic regeneration and improving quality of life of the resident population thus becomes key to a town’s survival, and innovative art projects can play a pivotal role in this.

As there is already considerable research on the more established and large international art festivals such as the Yokohama Triennale, Echigo Tsumari Art Triennale and Setouchi Art Triennale (the subject of a chapter I authored for an edited volume), this project instead focuses on the increasing number of small to mid-scale art projects aimed at developing sustainable activities for communities in smaller cities which have gained momentum since the 2010s. An important distinction needs to be made here: while a

high-profile art event such as the Yokohama Triennale is widely recognized as a government-led creative city initiative, socially-oriented art projects deployed on a more modest scale are usually oriented at urban revitalisation for the local community and residents. Furthermore, since much has been published about art projects especially in Japanese, I instead examine the contribution of architectural collaborators in art projects, to highlight the unconventional approaches and solutions they adopt that run counter to traditional practice. In addition to undertaking literature review, which was made possible through a visiting researcher arrangement at Rikkyo University by my host Koizumi Motohiro from the College of Sociology, interviews with scholars, government officers and independent proprietors as well as fieldwork including attending planned events were conducted to obtain an overview on the landscape of socially-engaged art in the context of Japan.

To better frame my scope of research, I began by looking into the better known regeneration-driven art project initiatives around Tokyo and just beyond, in particular the inner city neighbourhood of Yanesen (Yanaka-Nezu-Sendagi) in Taito City, the former red light district of Koganecho in Yokohama, and the old downtown area of Maebashi in Gunma Prefecture. Repeated visits over the course of the three-month fellowship in Japan provided me a more nuanced understanding of the outcomes and reception of these art projects in terms of how they have enabled grassroots revitalisation and built heritage conservation, and insights into the process of creation. In my First Activity Report, I noted the strategic location of Arts Maebashi that opened in 2013 not only in relation to Maebashi City but also its reasonable travel distance from the overcrowded capital makes for a pleasant daytrip for cultural activities. The decision to house a new municipal art museum in the former Seibu department store building was not incidental. Capitalising on the Seibu group's legacy of supporting domestic art in Japan during the 1970s, the renovation by architect Mizutani Toshihiro retains the building's original undulating frontage (Fig.1), making the art facility a new local landmark for the city.



Fig.1. The undulating façade of the Arts Maebashi building. Photograph: Simone Chung (2019).

In addition to building a sizeable art collection, the activities of Arts Maebashi spread out of the museum's premises to engage with the local residential population and activate latent spaces in the city. The compact size of the downtown area makes for walkability. According to Sumitomo Fumihiko, Director of Arts Maebashi, these are the reasons why the new art museum was to be located in this quarter when the idea was first mooted, within several blocks of the municipality's administration offices and local high street, to kickstart Maebashi's urban regeneration process and as an anchor cultural attraction of the city. Taking "art into the streets" also allows the museum to tap into Maebashi's small but robust local art scene for which the artist Shirakawa Yoshio was a central figure. Arts Maebashi cannot exist as a stand-alone venue: a strategic move is to link itself to the existing network of ground-up art spaces to create intangible connections as well as a visible presence through programming. Complementing Arts Maebashi's institutional function are other independently-run alternative art spaces in the old arcaded shopping street – Maebashi Works, a shared studio space occupied by a young artist collective, and Ya-gins, a café and art space.

Likewise, my conversation a month later with Hoashi Aki, Project Manager of the Organising Committee of the Yokohama Triennale, revealed how key art projects in the city of Yokohama – the international Yokohama Triennale and locally oriented BankART facilities and annual Koganecho Art Bazaar (Fig.2), have over time come to define their respective niches. This overview allowed me to appreciate the different scales and frequencies in which they operate. For a high-profile event such as the Yokohama Triennale, the amount of planning, programming and logistics entailed to realise this port city's eponymous art event is quite different than the fresh artworks of the Koganecho Art Bazaar housed in viaduct spaces and adjacent tenement buildings between Koganecho and Hinode stations. Optimising existing resources, the stable community of volunteers that the Koganecho Area Management has consolidated over the years, equipped with targeted skills training they periodically receive, means that these volunteers can be enlisted to assist in megaevents such as the Triennale.



Fig.2. Visit to the 2019 Koganecho Art Bazaar in September, post-fellowship. Photograph: Simone Chung (2019).

The importance of networks was also how I serendipitously came to identify my primary case studies. Underpinning this research project are two critical case studies: (1) the intangible network of alternative spaces linking Tottori City with the nearby *onsen* towns of Hamamura and Matsuzaki,<sup>1</sup> and (2) the “creative depopulation” stance adopted by Green Valley, an NPO spearheading the revitalisation of Kamiyama village in Tokushima Prefecture.

My interest in Tottori was initially sparked by Koizumi’s ongoing collaboration with its local alternative art space providers as part of his Sociology of Art module at Rikkyo, but more so after learning about Party Architecture, (パーティー建築), an unconventional peripatetic design-and-build collective currently based in Hamamura, from Mori Yoshitaka’s lecture “Alternative Space to Grow” in February 2019. With a slowly accumulating portfolio ranging from guesthouse conversions to home renovations, in urban neighbourhoods as well as rural towns, their projects are centred on the construction process being a social activity involving local participation from outside the group and utilising local materials to reflect local context. Having settled in Tokyo for the duration of my summer-long fellowship, Mori facilitated my e-introduction to Aikawa Yuka, a core member of Party Architecture and proprietor of Café Miracle, which doubles as a homestay for many members of the group. The latter graciously served as my host and guide when I travelled to Tottori in mid-June to meet the tightly knit group of recent in-migrants who run different ventures.



Fig.3. Dinner gathering at Café Miracle attended by, among others, members of Party Architecture, staff of Tami Guesthouse and Kisui Kuko’s owners. Photograph: Simone Chung (2019).

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<sup>1</sup> For clarity, Carl Cassegård (2014: 22) describes alternative spaces in Japan as “spaces that are felt by participants to offer relief from the oppressive features of mainstream arenas. Negative value judgements on people and activities subject to sanctions in mainstream life are suspended or playfully inverted and efforts are made to ensure an environment that is responsive to the needs and wishes of participants.”

What I crucially discovered was how this group mutually supported each other, intellectually and socially, through the diverse cultural activities and convivial events they organise in their respective premises. Besides Café Miracle, the loose network of independently run alternative spaces also include, in Matsuzaki town, Tami Guesthouse (たみ) which was started by Jatani Rie and Miyagi Kotaro almost ten years ago with an in-house café that began operating in January 2012, and the quaint bookshop Kisui Kukō (汽水空港) founded by Mori Tetsuya which he runs with his wife Akina (Fig.4). Even though the number of independent bookshops has increased in Japan, many continue to struggle business-wise due to tough competition from online sellers. As inclusive spaces, local bookshops need to carve a niche function beyond traditional trading to distinguish themselves from their virtual counterparts. Kisui Kukō has done so by serving as a base for counter-culture and a space for holding critical dialogues.



Fig.4. The independent bookshop Kisui Kuko in Matsuzaki, Tottori Prefecture. Photograph: Simone Chung (2019).

Although distributed across three locations, the aforementioned alternative spaces are connected by virtue of the people who run them as well as their social ties with one another. The integration of digital technology in everyday life and practices, especially in considerably rural parts of Japan such as Tottori, has been vital for sustaining aspatial kinship via social media and other online platforms that allow people to overcome geographical distances and more importantly, social isolation. The already high degree of public transport penetration and extensive network of rail (a local Sanin Main Line connects Matsuzaki and Hamamura with Tottori City), road and air travel had to some extent dissolved the divide between major cities and their hinterlands prior. But it is the technologically supported social infrastructure that allows this network of young activists to keep abreast of each other's movements.

ICT infrastructure was in fact what ignited the revitalisation of Kamiyama, a lush mountain town which rapidly developed into a hub for IT satellite offices and I-turn creatives in the 2010s. My interview with Yoshimoto Mitsuhiro, Director of Nissei Life Institute, in early July and his article "Kamiyama's Success in Creative Depopulation" (2017) convinced me to pursue further research on the efforts of Green

Valley, the Kamiyama-based NPO spearheading the town's grassroots regeneration initiatives. At his suggestion, I contacted Bando Kosuke, the architect for several recent conversions and renovation projects in Kamiyama, including the forthcoming Kamiyama Marugoto Technical College to be delivered through a private-public partnership. A native of Tokushima, Bando's initial enquiry into Kamiyama's Artist-in-Residence programme (KAIR) led to a sustained working relationship with Green Valley. The ensuing commissions, namely Blue Bear Office, Sansan's satellite office, Engawa Office, Kamiyama Valley Satellite Office Complex (KVSOC) and the guesthouse WEEK (Fig.5), were realised under the umbrella of BUS, an erstwhile architecture unit Bando formed with his friends Suma Issei and Ito Satoru. The trio's clever conversions, emphasising sensitive adaptations of vernacular buildings and upcycling reclaimed furniture and building materials, were showcased in the Japan pavilion in the 2016 Venice Biennale. For me however, the office-less and peripatetic mode of operating adopted by BUS draws parallels with that of Party Architecture and is indicative of changing attitudes in the architectural profession – one that is premised on agility and adaptability to reflect this era of precarity.



Fig.5. View from my room in WEEK Kamiyama newbuild accommodations. Reflected in the mirror is WEEK's main building and in the background, the KVSOC building across the road, both converted by BUS. Photograph: Simone Chung (2019).

My interview with Bando in mid-July proved to be a timely one, as he was scheduled to travel to Kamiyama with his architecture students the following weekend for a day tour of his built projects. Having hastily arranged my trip to coincide with theirs, I managed to view the work of BUS in addition to other interesting conversions and meet several young proprietors operating unconventional start-ups in Kamiyama. The following workday was packed with interviews and guided tours, first with Kudo Keiko, the coordinator for KAIR who brought me to view the numerous land art distributed across the forest that were completed under the programme, then with Ominami Shinya, Director of Green Valley, who kindly drove me all the way to Tokushima station at the end of the day rather than letting me wait for the intermittent bus to the city. The vis-à-vis meetings were invaluable as the discussions and site visits not only provided me a background

on the history and challenges faced by Kamiyama but also understand why the NPO, working closely with local government, has to conceive innovative and sometimes quite radical strategies that are borne out of necessity in order to overturn the town's projected demise.



Fig.6. Bando (left) with architecture students from Kyoto City University of the Arts in a meeting with Abe (centre) at Kamiyama Makerspace housed in the KVSOC building. Photograph: Simone Chung (2019).



Fig.7. Secluded outdoor sauna in the mountains of Kamiyama constructed and fuelled by cedar trees sourced in situ.

Photograph: Simone Chung (2019).

In tandem with the “Live in Kamiyama” campaign run by Green Valley through their In Kamiyama online resource to encourage creative I-turn migrants to settle there and replenish its dwindling population, the modest success of its Artist-in-Residence programme, introduced in 2010, has yielded unexpected long-term gains. Several artists hosted by the programme were so attracted by the quality of life in Kamiyama that they have since relocated permanently and launched their own businesses and projects. One such example is the Kamiyama Beer Project by husband-and-wife team Manus Sweeney and Abe Sayaka which began

operating in summer 2018 (Abe, a former KAIR, has also been running Kamiyama Makerspace in KVSOC since spring 2016) (Fig.6). Other lateral thinking I-turn migrants have identified interesting opportunities, such as the multiple innovation projects in the mountains by Saito Ikuko, a former executive and currently co-owner of the French eatery Café on Y Va in Kamiyama. Saito's recently completed hidden sauna pilot project, funded by an oil and gas grant, utilises the overabundant cedar lumber that plagues many remote locations in Japan as building material and fuel to suggest a human scale approach towards restoring ecological balance in such environs (Fig.7).

The intangible networks that connects the actors featured in the two case studies counter long-held assumptions of the urban as a fixed spatial entity. The overlaying of complex processes and interconnected system of dependency extending into relatively remote parts of Japan such as Tottori and Kamiyama reveal an inscription of new crucial functions that contribute to the local economy. A comparative reading of the cases demonstrates how grassroots derived initiatives and activities tend to flourish with little government intervention. They present an alternative approach to realising a more robust form of conservation through adaptive reuse of vacant facilities and purpose-driven conversions of durable vernacular stock befitting their new intended use. Furthermore, technological integration now makes it possible for vital ICT networks to support secure off-site data storage in distant facilities and remote working in the digital age. This was the driver for Kamiyama's transformation from an "artist village" which began with the launch of its Artist-in-Residence programme to a "creative village", reflecting Green Valley's vision to incubate a future-proof resident population. The flourishing of social life both online and off has been a determining factor in revitalising some of the most depopulated areas in Japan. Finally, art project activities and programmes have proven to be effective conduits for public education and raising awareness on polemical issues. Local actors are forced to re-examine the sustainable use of local resources, conceive creative strategies to update traditional arts and crafts for contemporary use and the transfer of intangible knowledge to maximise self-sufficiency.

Following the conclusion of my fellowship under the Japan Foundation Asian Center programme, I have scheduled two follow-up visits to Japan (to coincide with semester breaks in my institution), in December to complete outstanding interviews and literature review with the help of a translator, and further fieldwork in Tottori and Kamiyama in end February 2020. In terms of research dissemination, I have submitted a paper proposal for consideration in a major international conference for summer 2020 and a small monograph proposal to a renown university press. In the debriefing session, another outlet discussed is to hold a small exhibition at the Japan Cultural Centre (JCC) in Singapore sometime in mid-2020 to showcase my research with a talk to accompany its launch.

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