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Research Report

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Organization (at the time of the grant): Kumamoto University

Title of Research:

Revitalizing urban community life in Japan: New concepts and pilot project for the case of Kumamoto City based on lessons from Hanoi City

Purpose of Research:

This research aims to investigate the problematic situation regarding current dull community life in Japanese cities (the case Kumamoto City), and at the same time investigate in Vietnamese urban areas (the case Hanoi's Old Quarter) where community life still remains well in order to draw referable lessons for setting up a new concept plus a conceptual project for community revitalization in Japanese cities.

Theoretically, communities are essential components of a society, yet the essence is not widely recognized. Brill (2001) pointed out that many people think there are 2 types of social relationships: Private Life with family, closed friends and Public Life (PL) with diversity of strangers. People (incl. urban planners) either forget the last vital one: Community Life (CL) with neighbors, local acquaintances...or misunderstand CL for PL. CL contributes to everyone's sentimental life while PL does not. As a result, modern world has experienced a trans-territorial crisis of community deterioration that occurred in many developed countries and recently stretched out to fast developing countries (including traditionally community-oriented countries like China, Vietnam...) However, there are still urban areas in Vietnam where good CL remains, like the foremost example of Hanoi Old Quarter, from which good lessons of sustainable and healthy urban life can be drawn.

Japan, a country traditionally known as a highly community-oriented society, nowadays shows only 2 extreme images: (1) overcrowded stressful downtowns (esp. big cities) & (2) deserted lands (deserted spaces, deathly quiet & vague signals of CL). In fact, modern Japan has shown a series of socio-urban problems: aging and dropping population, rising life depress, community deterioration and loss of CL. Yet, it flourished a new research subject: *Community Life Revitalization*, a keyword of this research.

Concrete purposes of this research are (1) to investigate the problematic situation regarding CL in Japanese medium-sized cities through the case of Kumamoto City (with the area 266.8 of km² and population of 670.000, it belongs to medium-sized cities), (2) to investigate remained good CL in Vietnam through the case of Hanoi's Old Quarter in order to draw good and referable lessons for Japanese cities, (3) to propose a new conceptual model plus project for CL revitalization for Kumamoto City based on Hanoi's lessons, (4) to test proposals by interviewing residents of different social groups (in Kumamoto City) for their feedbacks, desires, requests, advices...; and (5) to finally conclude a conceptual model and pilot project for Japanese cities.

Content/Methodology of Research:

My research was conducted through following steps:

- 1) Literature review:** Previous studies of CL as well as civic building design were reviewed.
- 2) Fieldworks:** Two investigation sites in Kumamoto City and in Hanoi were selected. Fieldwork combined both *physical survey* (observation, taking photos, drawing and measurement of CL spaces, taking videos of CL...) and *social survey* (observation and interview).

Site 1: Eastern districts of central Kumamoto (Honjo, Hakuzan, Sinoe and Kokai).

Physical surveys (multiple): To observe community outdoor activities, we used spatio-temporal comparative study method. Different locations were observed, each location was photo-taken in different hours, different days, and different climatic seasons. The result proved our hypothesis that, except irregular events and the monthly neighborhood cleaning session, there was almost no regular community activities observed (Fig.1). Besides, public spaces are mono-functional. Civic buildings (e.g. the city's Kominkan) are working ineffectively, and their architectures are also not "open" and "eye-catching" to visitors (Fig. 2,3,4). "Kokai" is the only remaining traditional market where community members often meet up (Fig.5).

Social surveys: Our team aimed to interview 100 residents of different social groups and ages. Basically, we asked them about their CL, attendant frequencies, 03 main community spaces wanting to go the most and regularly (if provided), and the idea of setting up a "new-type community house". The results showed that most people did not have frequent community activities; they wanted to have a new-type community house, and 03 most favorite community spaces (if provided) were a new-type community house, a traditional market street and a local convenient supermarket (Fig 6, 7, 8).

Site 2: Hanoi's Old Quarter (1 km², population 80.000)

Physical surveys (Jan. & Sep., 2009): We also used spatio-temporal comparative method. Especially, since temporal changes of activities were so quick, we video-recorded the same street in every hour (6AM~11PM, on low-speed motorbike rides) to capture all activities and changes. The survey result proved our hypothesis that, social connection in this area remained well through different common activities such as group morning exercise, going to market, hanging out, chatting, playing, eating on the sidewalk together... (Fig. 9,10,11, 12)

Social surveys (Jan. & Sep., 2009): Our team also interviewed 100 residents of different social groups and ages. The questions were similar to those in Kumamoto, with more focus on common activities plus frequencies. Some important findings included the vital role of street activities and their "resources/stimulators" (like food stalls and street vendors), the cultural background and custom, the role of traditional markets, and overall, the role of "stimulators" to vitalize/maintain healthy CL (like the role of "Plaza houses" in step 3). We could also prove a misconception that climate could be a key factor of street activities, because even during days of unfavorable weather (very cold and wet in January), street activities were still popular (Fig. 10, 11).

3) Comprehensive conceptual proposals: Basing on the surveys' results, I set up a vision: "To set up a network of new-type community houses ("stimulators"), each serves as a convenient, attractive and advanced "micro society" that stimulates CL". Then I proposed a new-type community house called "Plaza House" (PH), with the word Plaza means a place for all to get together (in Latin). As a "micro society", I proposed diverse functional spaces for PH: (1) *Economic* (stores, e-shopping corner...), (2) *Social* (meeting-rooms, relax-corners...), (3) *Cultural* (library, media corners...), (4) *Socio-economic* (a post, out-door traditional market), (5) *Culturo-economic* (seminar rooms, hobby clubs...), (6) *Socio-cultural* (chat room, event rooms...) (Fig.15).

Planning: For selecting PH locations, I investigated idle lands, ineffective parking lots, buildings to be rebuilt and to be renovated. For distribution, I suggested the average distance between 2 PHs comfortably walkable: $(500\sim700\text{m}) \times 2 = 1000\sim1400\text{m}$ (Fig.16)

Traffic: I proposed 2 car-free systems: "Community Bus" linking PHs with public transport, and walking/cycling (eco-friendly, lively townscape).

Architecture: My key concepts were (1) High accessibility; (2) High visibility (good location, glass facades); (3) Eye-catching form; (4) Eco-friendly; (5) Economical (setup, running); (6) Parking restriction (to promote car-free access); and (7) Technically advanced (e.g. Roof solar cells...)

Miscellaneous: (1) *Logo-slogan*: distantly visual and eye-catching, easy to understand, reflecting "Nippon spirit" (Fig.17) (2) *Financing*: Government subsidies, NGOs, NPOs, community & entrepreneurial donation, goodwill revenue, rental, usage and membership revenue... (3) *Operation*: "neighbors (staff) serve neighbors (visitors)" to tighten neighborhood. (4) *PR*: Government shall PR the PH network by multimedia.

4) Conceptual pilot designs: I selected a site for PH pilot design (Fig. 18), made tentative design versions (Fig. 19) and let a community in Site 1 choose the best one. I also introduced it in Site 2 and collected feedbacks, advices.

5) Finalize sample design: I revised the sample design, introduced it to a small residential group in Honjo for final feedbacks, and finalized the design (Fig.20). Finally, small group presentations in both Kumamoto and Hanoi to disseminate the research were given.

Conclusion/Observation

With the generous support of The Matsushita International Foundation, the multiple field trips and other research tasks in Hanoi and Kumamoto became possible. I could collect a number of useful data for proposing a new-type community house (PH), which is expected to be able to “stimulate” and thus revitalize CL in Japanese cities (the case Kumamoto City, my “second home” in Japan). These surveys also helped me understand deeper about my hometown cum survey site Hanoi, and deepen my research record in Hanoi’s Old Quarter.

From the multiple surveys in Kumamoto, it could be concluded that currently citizens did not have much effective spaces for regular community activities, thus, get less active, and consequently the CL gets dull. They supported the idea and necessity of building new-type community houses (PHs).

From the 2 surveys in Hanoi, I could conclude the essence of street activities and their “resources/stimulators” (like food stalls, street vendors), the essence of cultural background and custom, the role of traditional markets, and overall, the vital role of “stimulators” to vitalize/maintain healthy CL. Although Japanese and Vietnamese urban cultural contexts are different, lessons from Hanoi really gave me ideas to set up new concepts of community revitalization for Japanese cities. As a result, I could propose a new conceptual PHs plus their network. Even though I was unable to widely disseminate this research to public as I wished (e.g. via public exhibition) due to a number of reasons, especially organizational and permission difficulties, I am glad that this research has completed with remarkable outputs. Of course, this research could not achieve its success without the kind collaboration of the residents I worked with.

Overall speaking, the ultimate meaning of this research was that it tightly bases on the community’s opinion and is done to serve the community itself. This concept really makes sense. Moreover, the research proved the belief that there are always transferable lessons among international societies, especially those of the same geographical region, in this case Japan and Vietnam in Asian context. Even though Japan is much developed than Vietnam, in terms of community life, the “much less industrialized” status of Vietnam is actually a fortune that helps Vietnam remain good traditional lifestyle and healthy community life. And lastly, this research has set a fundamental basis for my continual research on this subject in the future.

Thank you very much for your kind and generous support.

Appendix: Figures (next pages)



Fig 1. Comparative temporal street scenes in Hakuzan (a weekday at 9:40, same day at 17:55, and a weekend at 11:47)



Fig 2. Kokusai Koryu Kaikan and Shimin Kaikan (left)



Fig 3. Kenritsu SozoTaiikukan

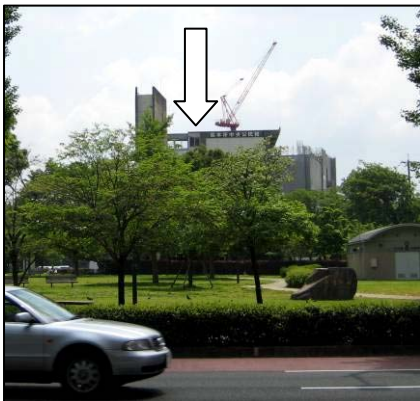
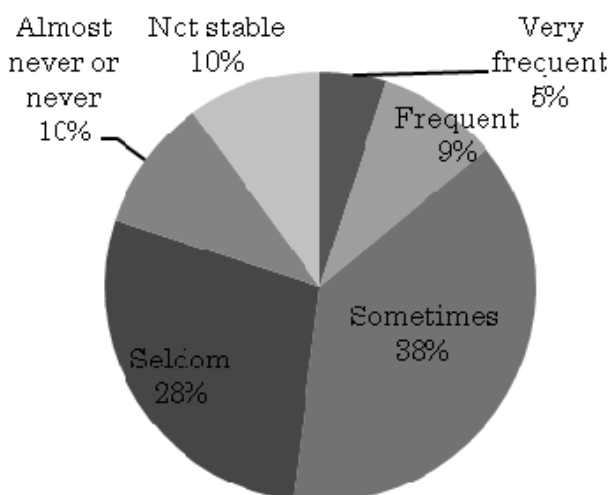


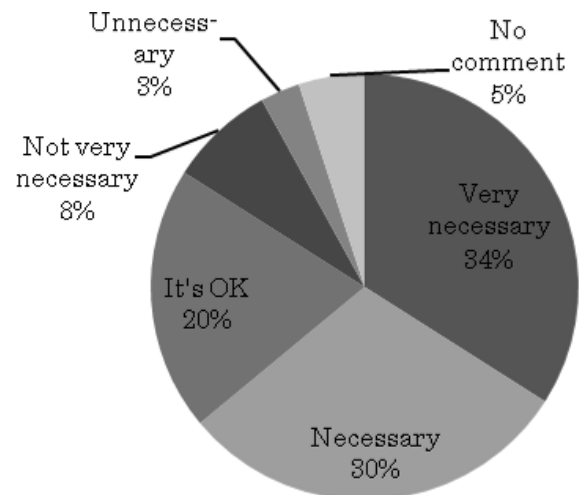
Fig 4. Chuo Kominkan (left) and an activity inside (right)



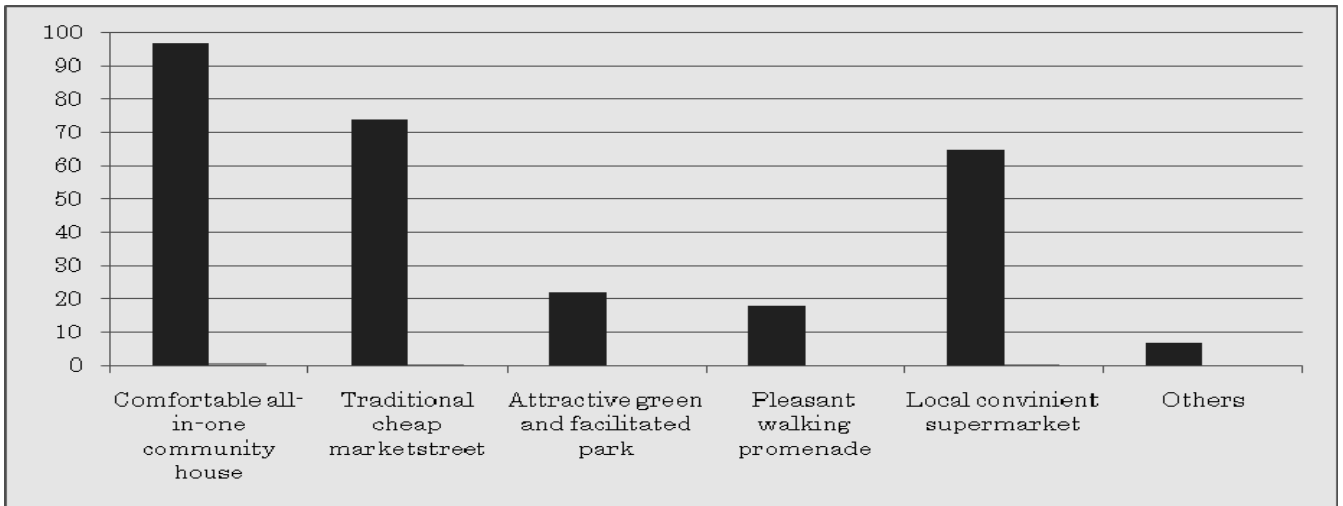
Fig 5. Kokai traditional market



F6. Frequency of attending community activities



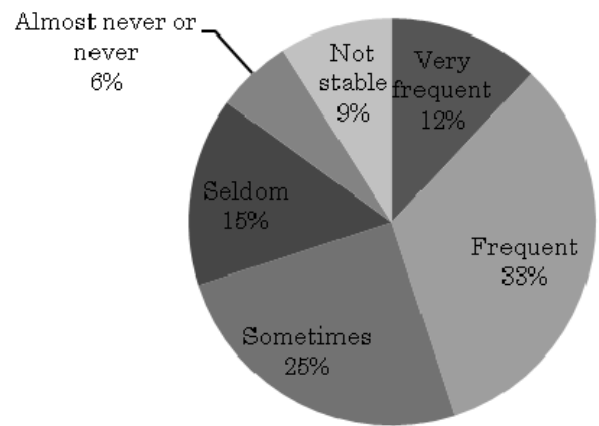
F7. Necessity of a new-type community house



F8. Three main community spaces wanting to go the most and regularly (if provided)



F9. Video-recording of the street activities



F13. Frequency of attending common activities (Site 2)



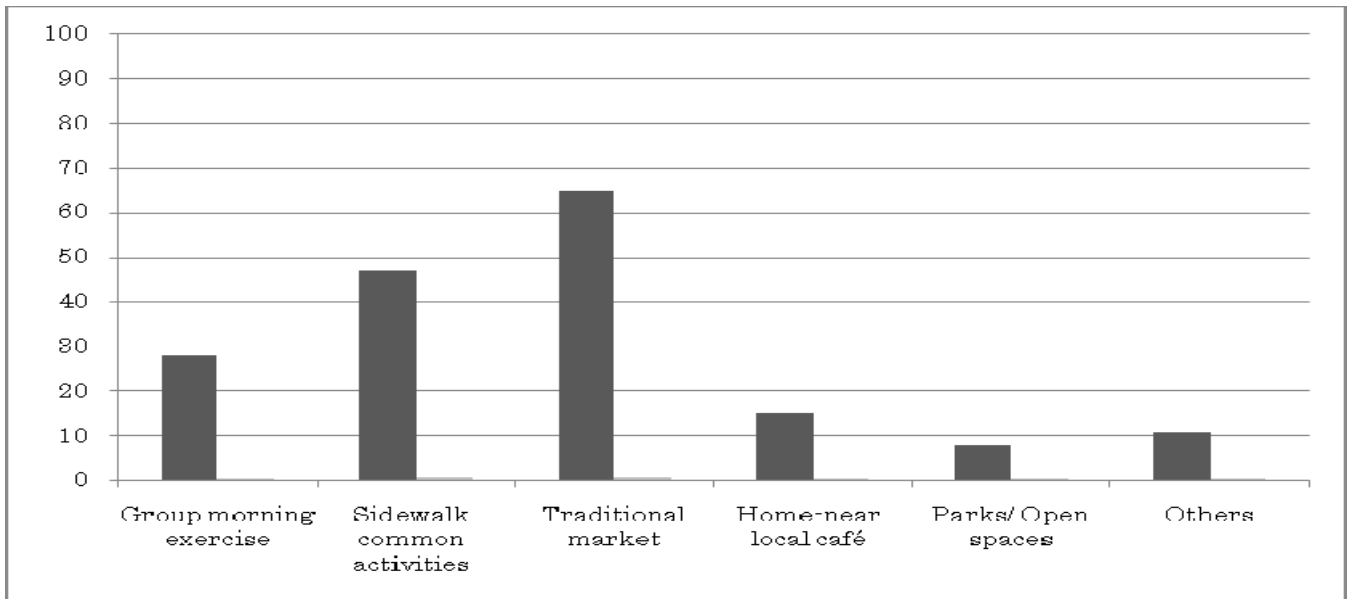
F10. Street activities in Hang Buom Street (1/2009)



F11. Street activities in Hang Dieu Street (1/2009)



F12. Group morning exercise by Hoan Kiem Lake (Near Site 2, many people from Site 2 attending) (Fall survey)



F14. Three main community places going most frequently or regularly (Site 2)

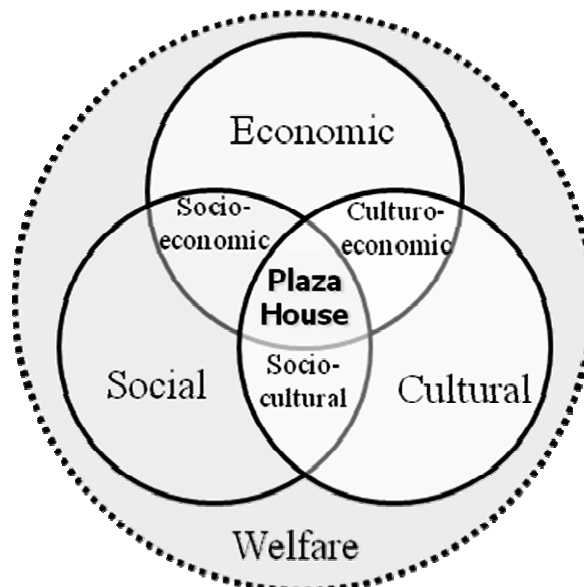


Fig 15. A PH's functional concept



F16. Examples of ineffective parking (top-left), little-used renovatable building (bottom-left) and proposed distribution map with community bus line (right)



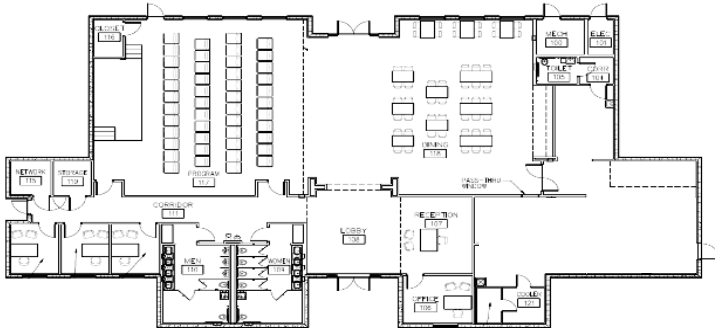
F17. The selected logo design by the community



F18. Pilot PH design: Selected location in Oe area with red line as outdoor market (left), and existing “combi” (right)



F19. Two tentative design versions (alternative) for the interviewed residents to choose (un-selected).



F20. A conceptual design selected by majority of interviewees: First floor plan (left) and perspective view (right). Part of the “combi” functionally remains, and the rest plus front parking spaces were changed to new PH