

Identifying, Cleaning, Restoring and Arranging for the Reoccupation of Vacant Homes: A Hands-On Attempt to Address Aging, Depopulation and a Consequent Abundance of Vacant Homes in a Rural Community in Kagoshima Japan

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Abstract

This paper provides a detailed account of the author's efforts, in a rapidly aging rural Japanese community of approximately 700 households and 1200 persons, to identify vacant homes, to find their owners, to receive approval from their owners for their rental or sale, to clean and restore said homes and ultimately to find suitable occupants for them. During the 2017 calendar year some forty potential homes were identified and the owners of seven of these homes were approached with varying levels of success. As a result of these efforts, one of the seven homes is now occupied by a young man who has moved into the community.

Background

In Japan, success stories regarding the restoration and re-occupation of vacant homes abound. These stories generally fail to describe the often-cumbersome process of identifying a potential home, finding and communicating with its landlord, reaching a general understanding with the landlord, preparing the home for re-use, finding an individual or family interested in occupying it and, finally, negotiating the terms of residence or other use with the landlord. Herein we will attempt to describe these steps in detail as they are currently being carried out for seven homes located in a farming community in southwest Japan. These case studies were all initiated during the first half of the 2017 calendar year. Most of them are still underway and remain unresolved.

The Search

On four separate days in January, February and March of 2017, the author (hereafter "I"), together with two university students (one taking photographs and the other taking notes), walked through the eleven communities that make up central Takata looking for vacant homes. Vacancy was confirmed by checking to see whether or not the electric meter was revolving and by talking with neighbors. I also asked anyone I encountered who lived in or had any connection with Takata if they knew of any vacant homes that might be in fairly good condition and available for rent. This initial search revealed the existence of nearly 100 vacant homes, in various stages of deterioration, located in central Takata.

keywords: vacant homes, depopulation, immigration, restoration, reoccupation

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Central Takata, Kawanabe Township, Minami Kyushu City

I then decided to pursue homes that 1) appeared to be in fairly good condition (structurally sound and not in need of a new roof), and 2) were situated such that they were a comfortable distance from their immediate neighbors. In particular, I looked for homes that enjoyed some distance from the home directly in front, as neighbors in the past were often relatives and homes tend to be located in closer proximity than newly arrived residents would find comfortable.

I also addressed a meeting of the heads of Takata's eleven inner and five outer communities and after presenting data forecasting future depopulation and vacancies in each of their communities, I asked them to help identify homes that might be suitable for rental. I did not ask them to contact homeowners but simply to share any information they might have with me. Unfortunately, only three of the sixteen community leaders responded. A vacant home introduced by one of them is described in Case Study #6 below.

Case Studies

Case Study #1: The Family Altar Craftsman's Home

This large home with an adjoining area for livestock, a chicken coop, a separate work area and an extensive rock garden was most recently lived in by a couple who made metal fittings and decorations for Buddhist family altars. They had worked in a separate, adjacent structure comparable in size to the house until their deaths in 2009 and 2011. The couple died fairly young – while still in their late 60s – and were survived by two sons, the elder living in Tokyo and the younger in Kagoshima City. I learned of the potential availability of this home from Mitsuo Arimura, a retired cattle farmer and leader in the community. I had the opportunity to meet the elder son when he returned home for New Years and we spent several hours together looking at the home and discussing its potential. As his parents had died young and he had worked with them for a number of years, he had not been emotionally prepared to rent the home out until recently and my interest in the home helped him to see it in a more positive light.



the first vacant home pursued by the author

I introduced the older son to Koyo Sato, a 29-year-old artist who was hoping to find a place to live in Takata and they reached a tentative agreement for Mr. Sato to move in sometime in the upcoming months. After the elder son had returned to Tokyo, twelve university students and I spent an afternoon cleaning out the work space. Mr. Arimura borrowed a truck with a crane assembly and we also removed a large rice-drying machine. The second son had agreed to remove the family Buddhist altar from the home and, in keeping with his request, an official rental contract had been prepared.



12 seminar students spent an afternoon cleaning the house.

However, when Mr. Arimura, Mr. Sato and I visited the home the following week and happened to meet the second son and his wife there, we were told that the home was no longer available for rent. It remains unclear why the initial decision was reversed but most likely this change reflects a rift between the two

brothers. I had mistakenly assumed that the elder brother had the authority to approve the rental of the house as would traditionally be the case in a Japanese family. Apparently, the younger brother, a medical doctor, and his wife, were not ready to give him that authority and not prepared to rent out the house. One year has passed and the home remains vacant.

Case Study #2: The Tobacco Storehouse Home

Located at the upper end of Takata, this moderately-sized home has a rock garden and small vegetable garden in the back and a separate storehouse originally for the hanging and drying of tobacco. The house was rebuilt in 1962, shortly after a major fire destroyed most of the homes in the area. Only the storehouse pre-dates the fire. The home was originally occupied by the Uchiharas. The husband – a woodsman and farmer – died in the late 1960s and thereafter the home was occupied solely by his widowed wife until she moved into a long-term care facility in 2015.

When it became clear that their mother would not be able to return to her home, her two surviving daughters approached Kazuto Kawahara, the owner of a local construction company, for his advice. He suggested they could sell the home and might be able to find a buyer in the range of \$20,000 or they could rent it for \$200–250. By chance, later that same week, I asked Mr. Kawahara if he was aware of any vacant homes that might be available for rent. I asked in keeping with my general search for vacant homes and with a specific interest in finding a home for Mr. Sato who had just received word that the home in Case Study #1 was not available.



The younger of two daughters shares memories of her parents and the house while sitting near the family's Buddhist altar.

In February, the daughters, Mr. Sato, Mr. Kawahara and I met at the home. At this meeting, arranged by Mr. Kawahara, the daughters agreed to rent the home to Mr. Sato for \$250 per month. Later that same month the daughters, the younger daughter's husband, the elder daughter's son, Mr. Sato and I met at the house again to sort through the family's possessions and separate out those items the daughters wanted to keep, Mr. Sato wanted to use, and anything that could be disposed of. The decision was made to leave the family's Buddhist altar in the house, covered by a simple curtain. Mr. Sato has been living in the home for almost one year now and is an active member of the community.



After a morning spent cleaning the house together, Koyo Sato, with goatee, enjoys lunch with the family.

Case Study #3: The Construction Company Employee's Home

Located near a Shinto shrine on the eastern end of Takata, this large home was first built in the 1950s and then rebuilt when its owners – the Ohtanis – retired and returned to Takata in the 1980s. The couple lived together in the home for some twenty years until the husband's death. Thereafter the wife remained alone in the home for ten more years until 2012 when she moved into a facility for the elderly in Tokyo to be near her three children.

This home is in excellent condition. It has a tea ceremony room with a separate entrance, a garage and a large potential bedroom or office space located several steps up from a spacious kitchen and dining area. Built a safe distance above a fairly large river, the house comes with several additional plots of land planted with various flowering and fruit-bearing trees. I found this home when canvassing the neighborhood with Mr. Sato and two students. Mr. Karikawa, a neighbor who periodically cuts the grass and airs out the house, provided me with Mrs. Ohtani's telephone number in Tokyo and I called her several times to discuss the possibility of renting her house. We became friendly during the course of these conversations and were pleased to find that her husband and I had both worked for two of Japan's largest construction companies. While her children were initially against the rental of the home and favored its being torn down, over the course of multiple conversations and an opportunity to meet upon their return to the home in May, they became open to the possibility of renting out the home.



The author, left, talking with the owner and two of her children at the time of a visit by the owner from Tokyo.

Shoichi Ohtani, the second son, whose area of expertise is the management of mainframe computers used in semiconductor chip manufacturing plants, considered moving into the family home, but was unable to find work in the Kagoshima area. When he returned with his wife on another occasion we talked again. He agreed to share any new information with regard to the family's intentions for the home and I promised to keep him informed of any new developments regarding potential renters.

Case Study #4: The School Teacher's Home

Located along a waterway at the upper end of Takata, this medium-sized farmhouse with an adjoining area for livestock was built in 1962 with recycled materials from two other homes one of which stood in the same location and was burned down in a major fire that destroyed 52 homes in this part of Takata. The original owners were a farming couple who lived here until the husband died in 1990 and the wife passed away in 2000. The current owners, their son and his wife, are retired school teachers. They live in Kagoshima City and visit the home on weekends a few times a month to air it out and tend to the yard.

This home was "found" by Koyo Sato, the new resident in Case Studies #1 and #2, and introduced to me. When I and others showed an interest in the home, the owners appear to have found a new appreciation of the home as well so while they were initially receptive to the idea of renting it out, they have decided not to rent it for the time being. Evidence of their newfound interest in the home can be found in their cutting back of overgrowth and the expansion of a vegetable garden in front of the house. This home may become an option sometime in the future and I remain in contact with the owners.

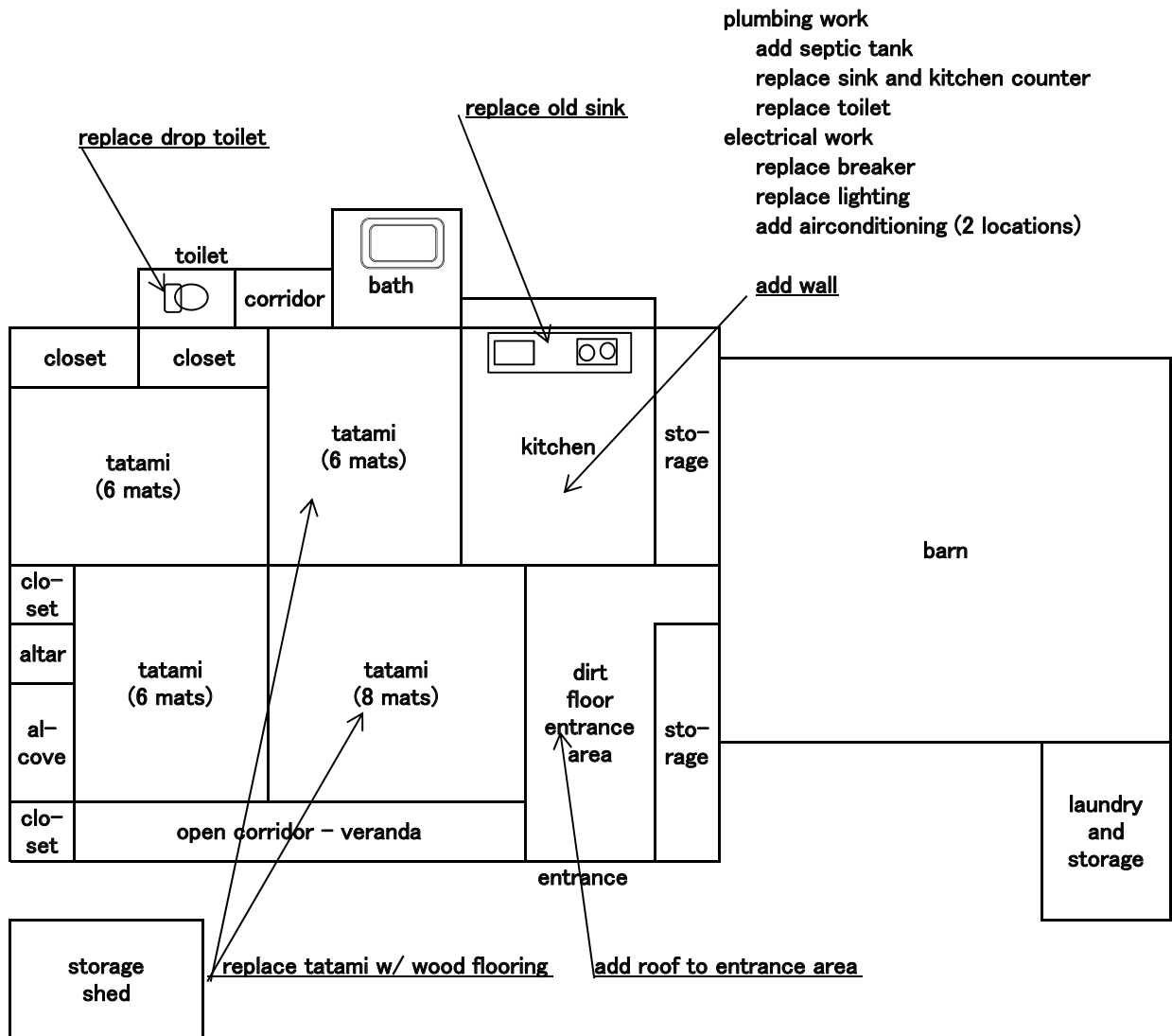
Case Study #5: The Kirin Beer Employee's Home

This home is a small farmhouse with an adjoining two-story barn, a medium-sized garden plot in the back and an electric-powered well with potable water. The first floor of the barn, originally for livestock, can now be used to park a car and the upstairs storage area can potentially be converted into an office space or bedroom. The home was built in 1961 and with the help of a new tile roof it survived a major fire that ravaged the thatched roof homes in the immediate vicinity the following year.



the Haraguchi home

The home's original owners were Seiji and Fuji Haraguchi. Seiji had worked for Kirin Beer in the Kansai area and it was with money saved from this work that he paid for its construction. Seiji died in 1988 and Fuji in 2000. Their son Hiroshi, a retired carpenter living in Kagoshima City with his wife Etsuko, visited the home regularly until back problems made it increasingly difficult for him to walk or drive. As a consequence, he and his wife rely on their son to drive them to Takata a few times a year.



floor plan of Haraguchi home and barn (with notes for potential work to be done)

With permission from the Haraguchis, I worked with a group of university students to clean out the house on four different occasions. Borrowing a large truck from Mr. Arimura, we made numerous trips to the local dump to dispose of old bedding, clothing and other household items. The cleaning stage complete, the house is in excellent condition.



Mr. Arimura's two-ton truck loaded to capacity

The owner has given me a copy of the keys to the house and I am currently responsible for the maintenance of the house and yard. The owner has also provided a fund of about \$800 from which I paid for ground maintenance once in August and again in December. This fund was also used to treat a group of students who worked on cleaning the house to refreshments and a lunch of ramen. The owner is open to the rental or sale of the house.

Case Study #6: The Long-Term Care Woman's Home

This small farmhouse with an adjoining area for livestock and a small garden plot in front was introduced to me by a community leader who is currently looking after the home in question because its owner is living in a long-term care facility with no hope of returning to her home. The community leader was apparently told that she could do with the home as she saw fit. When I was given an opportunity to look inside, I found the home full of its owner's possessions and in fairly poor condition. It appeared, however, that with the removal of a few flimsy walls and a thorough cleaning, the space could potentially be transformed into a small but comfortable accommodation. When I made this suggestion to the community leader and she passed it on to the homeowner, the homeowner said she was not prepared to let go of her home. This is to say that when the homeowner had imagined loosening her grip on her home in general terms, she had been prepared to do so, but when the discussion became more concrete, she was not ready to move forward.

As I am presently unable to communicate directly with the homeowner, I have not pursued this home further. In time, it may become a realistic option but for the time being it will remain on hold. I am not particularly distressed by this situation given the abundance of homes that will become available in the years to come. Of greater concern, however, is the fact that so few community leaders have made an effort to introduce homes that are available.

Case Study #7: The Stone Cutter's Home

A medium-sized farmhouse in one of the most populated areas of central Takata with an adjoining area for livestock and two sizeable sheds originally used for food preparation and for bathing. The house was

first built some 130 years ago and has been vacant since 1992. The family's youngest and only surviving daughter has visited the home on occasion to clean and air it out during the time since. However, with an increasing need to care for her sick husband, her visits have become less frequent and she has relied on a childhood friend who lives next door to look after the house in her absence, putting up storm windows prior to typhoons and such.

The home is in a state of disrepair and requires work on the bathroom wall, the kitchen counter, and the floorboards in several rooms. Roof work may be necessary as well and neighbors have suggested the potential presence of termites. As the two sheds in front of the home were in a dilapidated condition and were limiting the view from the main house, I decided – with the landlady's permission – to tear them down. We tore down the sheds using heavy machinery and with the help of several men from the community on one day and cleaned out the house on another. On both days my students and I enjoyed more help from community members than we had on any other occasion. Three women prepared food for us, an elderly man from the neighborhood cooked sweet potatoes and brought them over, and three other men contributed several hours of labor. Unfortunately, as the house got cleaner its state of disrepair became more evident and it may be too costly to pursue further.

Lessons Learned

Rapport

I have found that time spent listening to the homeowners and encouraging them to share their feelings about their homes has been productive and has helped us to have meaningful communication thereafter. My efforts to communicate with the landlords and to establish rapport have generally been rewarded with trust and cooperation. I have been careful not to rush this process, thereby giving the landlord time to consider their options and to discuss them with other family members. In this sense, this aspect of the vacant home search process is closer to "Counseling" than to "Sales."

Rent

In Case Study #2, the only instance in which a rent amount was negotiated thus far, I regret not making a greater effort to negotiate a lower monthly payment in keeping with actual real estate values and rental rates in the area. Mr. Kawahara, in a natural show of allegiance to the owner's daughters, proposed a rent of \$250 and that amount was agreed upon by all parties. However, given the relative lack of competition for the rental of vacant homes and the role that the renter plays in maintaining the home, this is truly a renter's market and should be treated as such. A monthly rent amount of \$100-\$200 would have been more appropriate for this home and these circumstances.

Assessing a Home's Potential and the Cost of Renovation

In Case Study #7, enamored with the location (in central Takata) and with the open southward facing plot of land on which the house is situated, I did not pay proper attention to the condition of the house itself and acted prematurely in making the decision to clean the house and to clear the land around it. A more careful look at the house with the assistance of construction, pest control and other experts would likely have led to the decision not to pursue the house in question in keeping with potential problems with the roof and the likelihood of extensive termite infestation. This said, the three days that were devoted to

the tearing down of two sheds and the removal of literally tons of household and other items were not an entire waste of time. After all, the groundwork was laid for future action with regard to a house and land which would otherwise have remained in a state of limbo given the lack of motivation or means on the part of the landlord and her children to take any action in the foreseeable future. One possible course of action may be to dismantle the house, clear the land, and build a new home here.

Assessing the Community's Commitment

During the first year of pointedly working to re-occupy Takata's homes, while there has been general support from the community for this effort, few members of the community have taken any concrete action to help. Working together with a dedicated crew of university students, I have cleaned out three homes as described in Case Studies 1, 5 and 7 above. Mr. Arimura was the only member of the community who participated in our work on #1 and a woman from the neighborhood boiled some potatoes and brought them over when we were cleaning #5. It was not until our work on #7 that there was any noteworthy response from the community.

I did not solicit help from the community in the hope that people would step forward without having to be asked. Unfortunately, very few did volunteer their time and even the community leaders were generally apathetic as evidenced in their failure to provide information about vacant homes in their respective communities. Only time will tell the degree to which local residents feel compelled to address this threat to the very existence of their community.

Financing Renovation Work

I had initially planned to wait until we had found potential occupants before making the commitment to renovate Takata's vacant homes. I had imagined that we could set up a renovation fund and use it to pay for the alterations a new resident required. When the resident paid their rent it would be deposited in the renovation fund until the initial investment had been recuperated. Thereafter, rent money would go directly to the landlord. The landlord, in return for waiting patiently for any income from the home, would enjoy "free" upgrades to the home that would increase its value. Common renovation work would include conversion to a flush toilet, conversion from tatami to wood flooring in some of the rooms, replacement of old floor boards, replacement of the kitchen sink and counter, and conversion of the second floor of the adjoining livestock area to a work space or additional bedroom.

While the above financing scheme may be a viable option at some point in the future, I am trying first to obtain funding for renovation materials and labor for an initial two homes from the local city government and the national government. If this funding becomes available (and the decision will be announced in April 2018), I will make initial changes to several homes before marketing them to potential occupants. Any additional and exceptional changes required by the future resident will be paid for by said resident.

Conclusions

While there are many potholes along the road to finding, preparing and re-occupying vacant homes, with some patience and care many of them can be avoided. This author learned many of these lessons the hard way by acting too quickly in several instances. In Case Study #7, for example, a more careful look at the house together with construction and pest control experts would have saved many hours of labor.

This said, the cleaning of the house enables its owner to move forward with its renovation or removal. In Case Study #1, a day's labor was lost but it would have been difficult to foresee that the eldest son was not the family's key decisionmaker and it would have been rude to question his authority.

Given the large number of homes that are becoming vacant, one can be increasingly selective when determining whether a home should be considered. A home should be structurally sound and located on a viable plot of land a reasonable distance from neighbors. Ideally the owner should be someone who can be communicated with directly and not through another individual as this is the only means by which to establish rapport.

Finally, I must decide how much time and effort to commit to finding homes and future residents for them. Should I, as an outsider who arrived in this community some six years ago, continue to pursue this work while members of the community who were born and raised here are pursuing their own interests and doing little to help out? Should my efforts be tied to theirs or are these separate matters? I have yet to find the answers to these questions. Time will tell.

Thanks

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Readings

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