



Understanding the role of spaces to entrepreneurship in rural Japan: benefits and challenges

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Abstract

Aging and shrinking population are immediate threats to sustainable development in Japan and are associated with long-lasting functional decline in the rural regions. The central government implemented a rural revitalization scheme which encouraged urban dwellers to relocate to rural towns where they would conduct entrepreneurial activities. The outcomes of the scheme in Gojome town in Akita Prefecture, Japan, were renovated abandoned buildings to accommodate entrepreneurial ventures of a growing rural entrepreneurial network. This case study aims to understand the role of these abandoned spaces to the entrepreneurial activities in a rural town through conversational interviewing and focused ethnography. Results show that built spaces reflected their provider's motivations and values and are physical manifestations of the strong relationships that exist within Gojome's entrepreneurs. The aesthetics of these structures exhibit modern design choices that are distinct from other buildings in town, but effectively similar amongst themselves. Two social networks were observed: one comprising the entrepreneurs and their network, and another comprising those outside of it. The case of Gojome provides insights into the benefits and challenges of urban to rural migration schemes in combating an aging population.

Keywords: Rural Entrepreneurship; Rural Revitalization; Built Spaces; Aging Society; Japan

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1. Introduction

The aging and shrinking society are contemporary challenges in Japan. The total population of Japan reached its peak in 2008 at 128 million people and approximately 31% of population decline is predicted by 2065 (Cabinet Office Japan, 2019). While the total population is shrinking, the proportion of elderly population, defined as age 65 and above, is expected to rise. In 2015, the share of population cohort age 65+ was 26.6%, and this figure is predicted to increase to 38.4% by 2065.

It is important to note that the experience of the aging and shrinking society phenomenon differs considerably between urban areas and rural areas. Urban areas are expected to remain populous as the global urbanization trend will keep feeding young population to cities (UN, 2014). In the case of Japan, the internal migration from rural areas to three major metropolitan areas, Tokyo, Osaka, and Nagoya, started in late 1950s. Among them, Tokyo metropolitan area has been the only major city area that has achieved positive net migration throughout the rapid economic growth period (1954-1970) and the bubble economy period (1985-1991). Although the rate of in-migration to Tokyo slowed during the 1990s due to the economic recession, it recovered during the 2000s and the positive net migration to Tokyo area remains a strong trend.

In contrast, the experience of rural areas has been predominantly long-lasting functional decline under the current aging and shrinking society. Such situation has been recognized as *kasoka* ("becoming too-sparsely populated" in Japanese) and this term emerged during 1960s to describe the depopulation trend caused by the continual outflow of young people from rural villages, especially in hilly and mountainous areas, to cities (Minami, 2008; Matanle and Sato, 2010; Lützel et al., 2020). The concept of *Genkai shuraku* ("marginal hamlet" in Japanese) was introduced to describe a state of rural community that is gradually fading out due to excessive degree of depopulation and aging of residents, and Ono (2005, 2008) argues that those rural communities with more than 50% of elderly residents, age 65 and above, are in the state of community marginalization. In rural towns and villages where community marginalization is spreading, it is common to observe the management challenges of abandoned houses (Yusa et al., 2006; Yamamoto and Nakazono, 2008; Shinobe and Miyachi, 2012), abandoned farmlands (Inaba, 2006; Arai, 2009; Ishimaru, 2009), and closed public facilities such as elementary schools (Kobayashi and Saio 2011).

To address these rural declines, the central government is implementing a new scheme for rural revitalization called *Chihouseusei* that has the thematic foci of community development, human resource mobilization, and job creation (Cabinet Secretariat, 2015). Part of this scheme includes the promotion of counter urbanization (Champion, 1989; Mitchell, 2004) as the main challenge for the country is how to tackle the overconcentration of population in the capital (Nihon sousei kaigi, 2014). One of the countermeasures introduced by the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communication in 2009 was the Regional Revitalization Cooperation Officer Program (*Chiiki okoshi kyoryokutai* in Japanese). This program aims to promote human resource mobilization between urban areas and rural areas. Municipal governments in rural regions are eligible to apply for financial resources for hiring urban residents to work on regional revitalization. By 2019, 5,503 people were registered as regional revitalization officers and have migrated to rural areas.

Along with this mobilization program by the central government, new types of urban-to-rural migration emerged such as lifestyle migration, entrepreneurial migration, and retirement migration (Stone and Stubbs, 2007; Feldhoff, 2011; Klien, 2019). Those migrants are seen as important human resources who help the rural communities to refine and redefine revitalization of their economic, social, and environmental activities

(Stockdale, 2006; Matanle and Sato, 2010). Furthermore, entrepreneurial-minded migrants play an important role in creating innovations in rural areas by combining existing resources with their strong leadership (Haga, 2018). One commonality found across the projects initiated by these in-migrants in rural Japan is the use of local assets that were once abandoned due to the lack of local demands. These local assets are not limited to tangible space (e.g., houses, shops, schools) but also include intangible space (e.g., seasonal festivals, farmers' market, cultural clubs). Since these in-migrants have experiences and networks from their previous careers or urban lives, they are often capable of re-examining the value of these local assets and propose alternative ways to use them for both business and community purposes.

The aim of this present research is to investigate the role of spaces in rural entrepreneurial activities; specifically, this exploratory study endeavours to understand how built spaces interact with entrepreneurial-minded in-migrants and their social networks in a rural town in Japan, as studies on the places of transformation and revitalization in rural and remote areas are still lacking (Li et al., 2019). This will be done through an initial case study of rural entrepreneurship in Gojome town, Akita, Japan. In this study, built spaces refers to physical structures owned by rural entrepreneurs in the case study area.

2. Methodology

2.1. Research design

This study adopts a case study approach (Yin, 2014) to investigate the role of spaces in entrepreneurial projects in rural areas. The studied projects were observed as community development and entrepreneurial phenomenon in a real world setting and treated as a case study to analyze the role of spaces to entrepreneurial activities in rural Japan. The authors chose Gojome town in Akita Prefecture, Japan, as study site for this research because the town has been known as one of the most proactive cases of rural revitalization through promoting in-migration of entrepreneurs from major cities. For instance, the municipal government office provides a website that showcases lifestyles of in-migrants. The team conducted an initial site visit on July 29-30, 2019, to briefly transect and notate first impressions of Gojome's built environment. Then, internal discussion was conducted to exchange impressions and revise the interview protocol and shortlist target respondents for semi-structured interviews. Fieldwork and interviews were done from August 20-26, 2019. Additionally, one of the authors has been conducting fieldwork on rural entrepreneurship in Gojome since 2015 using a focused ethnography approach (Knoblauch, 2005).

Spaces analysed in this research are treated by the idea of "built spaces", to emphasize their physicality and materialism, but not disregard the social elements that created the spaces, or are intertwined, shaped, and derived by them (Yanow, 1995). The built space has been long regarded as intrinsically intertwined with the people who built, used, and even tangentially interact with it, with many studies attempting to understand this relationship between the physical and the social (de Vaujany and Vaast, 2013; Chan et al., 2019). To discuss the interactions between these built spaces and their surrounding social networks, this research further adopts the theoretical foundations of "spatial legacies" as discussed by de Vaujany and Vaast (2013), and the time and space contradictions as suggested by the idea of heterotopia posited by Foucault (1986). Similar lenses were used by recent studies on rural re-settlement or migration to understand the lives and interactions of the migrants (Klein, 2022; Kurochkina, 2022), but in this study more focus is placed on the built

environments the rural in-migrants have created for themselves, and the implications or consequences of those built spaces.

2.2. Case study: rural entrepreneurship and space utilization in Gojome town, Akita, Japan

The town of Gojome is in the central area of Akita Prefecture (Figure 1). Akita has the highest rate of population decline and population aging in Japan as of 2018 (Statistics Bureau, Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications, 2018). The prefecture has an approximate population of 1 million, however it has been losing 1% of its population annually. This continual decline is caused by both natural death and outflow of population in the 20s and 30s age group. Gojome itself has a population of almost 9,500 according to Japan's 2015 Population Census, and it is also facing similar occurrence of depopulation and aging population (Statistics Bureau, Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications, 2019). A consequence of this, as with many other depopulated parts of Japan, is an increasing number of abandoned buildings in the town.

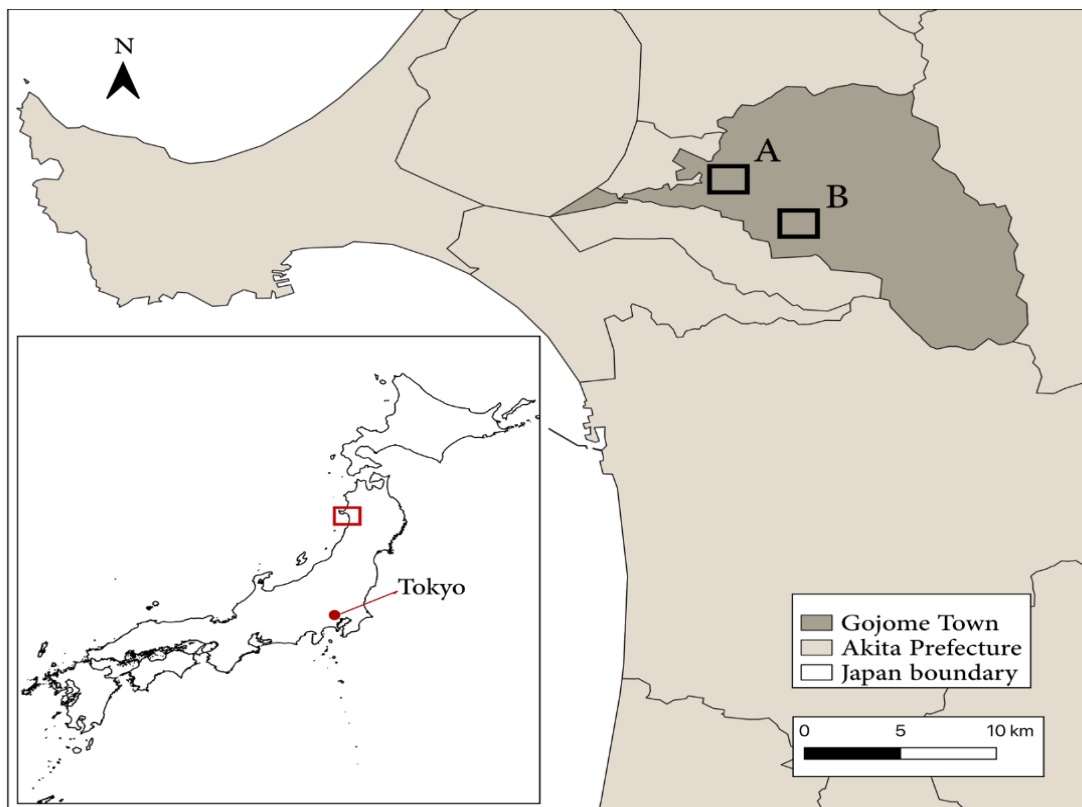


Figure 1. Location of Gojome. Gojome town (dark grey) in Akita Prefecture (light grey), and location of study areas (black rectangular outlines) within Gojome. Study area A represents a cluster of four spaces, while study area B represents the location of the final fifth space (Babame Base). The inset map shows the location and extent of primary map (red rectangular outline) relative to the main islands of Japan.

2.2.1. The rural revitalization program and rural entrepreneurs

It is important to distinguish the rural revitalization officers (of the Regional Revitalization Cooperative Officer Program) from rural entrepreneurs. The rural revitalization program saw three rural revitalization officers immigrate to Gojome in 2014 with their own personal projects aimed at revitalizing Gojome. The reason these officers chose Gojome over other rural areas in Japan was because they knew someone who was based there. Over time, and through building more local connections, these officers saw opportunities to collaborate with locals, whom we refer to as rural entrepreneurs, and utilize its resources like converting abandoned buildings to create the spaces that eventually became this study's targets of interest.

2.2.2. Spaces in consideration

Five entrepreneurial projects directly related to the officers and that include the utilization of abandoned spaces were identified in this study. These projects either exhibit unique design cues or unique functions compared to the rest of spaces in Gojome town. Those five projects identified are: Ichi Cafe, Babame Base, Monokatari, Hikobe Cafe, and Asobiba (Table 1).

Table 1. Brief descriptions of the spaces studied

Project	Description
Ichi Cafe	Converted from an abandoned house, this is a two-story space with a café on the first floor, and a gallery/workshop space on the second floor. Ichi cafe was designed by the husband of the owner, and the creation of the space was a collaborative effort between entrepreneurs and volunteer Gojome residents. The café is located at the entrance of the Gojome morning market street and is a popular place to gather during the weekends. People go to have coffee and baked goods, attend events such as wine tasting, or enjoy crafts or artworks in the gallery space (Figure 2a). Ichi café is also adjacent to <i>Tada-no-Asobiba</i> (see below)
Babame Base	Located outside the city center and surrounded by rice paddy fields, Babame Base was renovated from an abandoned elementary school and is currently managed by a former revitalization officer. It serves as the incubator for entrepreneurial businesses that have relocated to or are founded in Gojome and supports the regional revitalization progress. Currently, Babame Base also includes a variety of businesses, such as a beauty salon and an educational consulting agency (Figure 2b).
Monokatari	This space was converted from an abandoned historical house. Created and managed by an artist (who was born and raised in Gojome and migrated back during his mid-thirties), the space functions as a gallery and a bookstore (Figure 2c) The space is carefully designed, with furniture pieces sourced from Kyoto or handcrafted by local carpenters. It hosts exhibitions, inviting local and foreign artists. On occasion, it hosts events for families or local students.

Table 1. Cont.

Project	Description
Hikobe Cafe	Renovated from an unutilized two-story building, Hikobe Café is adjacent to a sake (rice wine) brewery and features local sake culture and edible products (Figure 2d). Managed by a former revitalization officer, Hikobe café also hosts events.
TADA-NO-Asobiba	Adjacent to Ichi Café, <i>Tada-no-Asobiba</i> is a children's playground renovated from an abandoned two-story house. Designed and managed by the entrepreneurs, it provides a spacious place for kids to play freely (Figure 2e).



Figure 2. Spaces studied in pictures. a) The counter and main dining area of Ichi café; b) one of the rooms rented out to entrepreneurial ventures in Babame Base; c) the bookstore and art gallery of Monokatari; d) The counter and seating of Hikobe café; e) the play area; and, f) open space of Tada-no-Asobiba

2.2.3. Semi-structured interviews

Semi-structured interviews were conducted on the project leaders at the site of their business or project. An interview protocol was used for these interviews (see Table 2).

Table 2. The interview protocol

<i>Perspective</i>	<i>Themes</i>	<i>General Question</i>	<i>Key Questions</i>
<i>Providers of the Space</i>	Motivations for the spaces	What was your motivation for creating or providing this space?	How did you design the space?
			Who did you expect to use the space?
			Who actually uses the space?
			What do you think is the role of the space in Gojome?
<i>Users of the Space</i>	Future Plans for Space	What are your future prospects?	What kind of Gojome do you hope to see in 10 years?
			How do you see your business in 10 years?
	Frequented spaces apart from home and work	Besides home and work, where else do you spend your time in Gojome?	What spaces do you visit often?
			What do you do there?
			Who do you interact with?
			How are these spaces important to you?
	Use of pre-identified spaces (Supported by pictures of places and a map of Gojome shown to respondents during interview)	Have you visited these spaces?	What role do these spaces play in Gojome?
			Do you recognize these spaces?
			What do you like or dislike about these spaces?
			What do you think is the importance of these spaces for Gojome?

Note: The questions were divided into two perspectives (first column) broken down into themes and variations questions (second to fourth columns). Providers are defined as entrepreneurs who established the space, while users are defined as its consumers.

Pictures showing the identified spaces were shown to the respondents during the interview to discuss the theme of built spaces. Interviews were held in Japanese and were translated in English immediately after the response for members of the team who are not fluent in Japanese.

Apart from scheduled interviews, informal interviews were conducted with long-time residents whom the authors chanced upon while conducting fieldwork around town. Although not representative, these conversations were used to triangulate information from respondents and to understand the sentiments of local people to each project and to further assimilate the context of residents' daily living. Often these conversations centred on the theme of spaces that locals visited or those that they avoided as well as their reasons for doing so.

3. Results

In this section, the role of spaces is presented from the perspective of the space providers, the entrepreneurs, and the point of view of the space users, the community.

3.1. The role of spaces to entrepreneurs

Although rural revitalization officers were distinguished from rural entrepreneurs earlier, the case of Gojome illustrated that regardless of the initial motivations of the individuals, the outcomes of their actions and entrepreneurial pathways are sufficiently similar that they can both be classified under the umbrella of "Gojome's rural entrepreneurs." For the officers, establishing their presence through the construction of physical spaces were integral and symbolic of their migration to Gojome. These spaces were tangible manifestations of the mission and vision they had for themselves and the community. It resulted into an avenue for them to attract like-minded locals and expand their social network through time. As heard in the interviews conducted, both rural revitalization officers and other rural entrepreneurs in Gojome leveraged social networks and social capital to create their enterprises. Given this similarity, the authors treated the spaces created by rural revitalization officers and those created by other rural entrepreneurs as one integrated set of data in this study.

3.1.1. The necessity of built spaces to Gojome's rural entrepreneurs

The importance of having a physical space was emphasized multiple times throughout interviews with different rural entrepreneurs. The rural entrepreneurs interviewed all owned or co-owned businesses that involved a built space – cafes, an art gallery-cum-bookstore, and an indoor playground for children.

To illustrate, the built space of the art gallery was not designed solely to be aesthetically pleasing, but also to be a home to a "cultural capital" that – according to its provider – aims at sharing Gojome's history with its community as well as others outside of Gojome. The gallery is housed in a very old but renovated house and the art gallery owner "wanted to cultivate a culture on top of [the 100 years already accumulated by the house], so that's why it has to be this space". His long-term vision – "envisioning 20 years later, 30 years later, or maybe even 50 years later" – sees the evolution of people together with the art gallery space.

For the designer of the children's playground, the motivation for a built space on the main street of Gojome was to observe the naturally evolving process of community development through the participation of Gojome residents. To do so, he came up with the project of "just a playground" that "naturally creates playful activities" for children as a space for self-expression and spontaneous interaction. A space like this is a "prototyping project" to provide people with an awareness of the importance of play, with the potential to be incepted to other towns or communities or even an office environment.

3.1.2. Built spaces offer an opportunity for rural entrepreneurs to express their visions and identities

Compared to Gojome's general landscape, these built spaces stand out in terms of their design and construction. An example of this is the interior colour schemes, layout, and furnishing. Not only did the rural entrepreneurs have very strong visions for how they wanted their built spaces to function, but this vision was also strongly materialized through the design and construction of the built space. According to the café's designer, "The first floor – my [co-owner] said – people who would come to this café, the expected customers, are those who want to talk to me (the co-owner). She said it is a necessity we have counter seating." The art gallery owner also noted that, "This house is a 100-year-old traditional house... I wanted to get that shape back... I wanted to recover the good part of the original traditional space, but also bringing new aspects. So, combining the traditional and the new - I thought I could make something beautiful as art." From these rural entrepreneurs' point of view, the physical design and construction of these spaces are essential to the purposes of the spaces, as they shape the intended involvement of the customers.

3.1.3. Strongly envisioned built spaces are an effect of, and have an effect on, social and community networks

Finally, these spaces were built and sustained because of the help their owners received from their social and community networks. This occurred in two ways - one, in the physical construction of the built space, and two, in the continued functioning of the built space. About the first way, the art gallery said, "I have old friends who help me out making all these materials too and my neighbours who would support me as well." Similarly, according to the designer who co-owns the cafe, "We had to renovate a lot of things because it was an old, abandoned house so how we did that - we had around 20 - 30 people - friends and the local people helping us to break down the walls and repaint the walls and everything together."

The latter way arises from the support the owners receive from their networks to ensure the continued functioning of the built space. As the art gallery owner puts it, an advantage of setting an enterprise up in Gojome was that he would have "something like a community safety net."

In turn, this process of setting up rural enterprises was found to have an effect on wider community relations. The strength of the initial social network that created the built space, coupled with the strong design of the built space, can form barriers of entry to newcomers to the space.

As the designer tells it, his co-owner has observed that local people have said that they were hesitant to patronize this cafe because 'elite people go there'. From the co-owner's perspective, the local community assumes that 'only those in-migrants doing those interesting entrepreneurial activities are visiting the café.' Similarly, the owner of the indoor playground said that since much of the physical construction was largely

undertaken by his friends, people who did not participate in the construction initially found this space 'strange' and 'weird'.

However, the tangible presence of the built space in the community allowed for unintended and intended interactions between community members. As these spaces are visible on main streets, they become unavoidable to those who pass by, or to those living around the area. Then, opportunities for different and unintended forms of interaction are created. For instance, the indoor playground owner observed that locals had initially made complaints to the city government because of changes to the surrounding neighbourhood as a result of building the indoor playground. After a workshop was organized involving the locals with the participants of the business, however, a solution was reached that enhanced the atmosphere of the neighbourhood. The art gallery owner also mentioned that he 'intentionally made this space open and viewable from the street' so that everyone can see what is happening within the space. This resulted in remarks from strangers over the novelty of his art gallery.

3.2. The role of spaces to the community

The spaces that were the result of entrepreneurial activities of migrant rural revitalization officers symbolized the presence of external and urban ideas that new members of the community have brought. As such, these spaces exhibit unfamiliar and non-traditional interiors and exteriors that were stark contrasts of the existing community. This somehow created a barrier for participation to the change, which has in turn strengthened the relationships of the entrepreneurs and of those who welcomed the change. Unintentionally however, it has also widened the gap between the existing community in Gojome and the growing social network of the entrepreneurs.

3.2.1. Design of built spaces deters certain community members

Key interviews also revealed that unfamiliarity of built spaces can initially deter entry, but this can be overcome through 'key person[s]' that facilitate engagement between the new built spaces and community members deterred by the unfamiliar design of the space.

An elderly member of the community who works as a server at a transportation hub in Gojome thought the built spaces of the enterprises were inaccessible to her because of their unfamiliar physical design, despite her willingness and interest in visiting. For comparison, she mentioned karaoke stores and izakayas (small Japanese pubs) as physical spaces she felt more comfortable in, as she was more familiar with those places. Moreover, she felt that people will judge her for patronizing Ichi Café as she believed that she, as an elderly person, does not fit into the expected clientele of Ichi Café, and will be judged for being old or outdated.

Another interviewee – another elderly member of the community, visits Ichi Café regularly. However, although this person frequents Ichi Café, he mentioned that he goes only to visit a specific person who works there and does not interact with any other person at the café. He believed that the choice to utilize space is based on personal relations.

3.2.2. Built spaces encourage and offer opportunities for like-minded community members to interact

Interviewees mentioned that collaborations within these built spaces are common due to common interests, aesthetics, and people. One interviewee – the owner of a nearby grocery store which features gourmet and curated imported products – mentioned that while this grocery store gets invited to participate in multiple produce showcase events, she is strict about which invitation she accepts, as it depends on ‘whether the taste of the event itself’ matches the store’s concept, and ‘what [the collaborators] want to communicate with the local people.’ She often collaborates with Ichi Café to hold special events where she sells select wines.

Furthermore, according to a civil servant from the city hall, the government in Gojome was strongly reliant on social networks within the community, such as those facilitated by rural revitalization officers. This is because the local government does not have much know-how in running such entrepreneurial initiatives and therefore outsourced to rural revitalization officers and other entrepreneurs. Consequently, the built entrepreneurial spaces function as a venue to receive more in-migrants like the initial batch of rural revitalization officers.

4. Discussion

4.1. Built spaces create dynamic impacts

Since the spaces created by the rural entrepreneurs are clearly deliberate and evocative of their respective visions, the term ‘built spaces’ is used to discuss them. This is to emphasize the physical construction involved in creating such a space, as well as the physical and inevitably social boundaries that accompany such construction. Built spaces is a term applied across academic fields of architecture, archaeology, and geography, amongst others (Cutting, 2006; Caballero, 2011). While definitions vary in terms of scale and applicability, it generally refers to a man-made space comprising some form of interior and exterior, and consequently some boundary to define the interior space (Caballero, 2011). The materialism of the built space (. i.e., walls and decoration) have long been recognized to be “entangled” or “imbricated” with the social life, leading to dynamic relationships between built spaces and the surrounding social networks (de Vaujany and Vaast, 2013). These dynamic relationships are also evident in Gojome.

The creation of built spaces strengthened social networks in Gojome because it involved time commitment and volunteerism. Through the rural revitalization program, three officers in-migrated to Gojome. By interacting with locals, they were able to integrate into an existing network of locals. The construction of Ichi Cafe and Asobiba were collaborations involving revitalization officers and their local social network, which reinforced their integration into the local community. For example, construction for both Ichi Cafe and Asobiba was only successful due to collaboration between the in-migrants and the locals.

The dynamism is further realized over time. Relative permanence of these spaces, coupled with the passage of time, can result in the strengthening of existing social networks as well as the initiation of new interactions with those outside of the existing network. Stronger social networks fostered by the creation of the built space also ensured its longevity. The spaces are largely kept in use by the same participants of the social network that created the physical space in the first place. Through time, their relationships matured because of regular use of the space as a meeting place to chat, and as a strategic resting area for a morning market, among others.

For example, many of the observed frequent customers at Ichi Cafe were known to be those who had helped with its construction or conception.

These interactions align with the idea of “spatial legacies” also posited by de Vaujany and Vaast (2013), creating dynamic change trajectories for these built spaces, as well as a form of legitimacy to entrench the built spaces further into their surrounding environments, regardless of what social tensions might still exist. Artifacts tend to emerge from collaboration between entrepreneurs and the rural locality where their interventions are carried out (Korsgaard et al., 2015). Time and effort invested in these built spaces strengthened and cultivated relationships of involved actors. A cafe, an art gallery-cum-bookstore, and an indoor playground are creative and social endeavours that require the interaction of multiple actors not just within a built space in order to function successfully, but also with the built space. Many of these initiatives do not exhibit scalability nor profitability but are continuously pursued by these networks of entrepreneurs, nonetheless. Profit is not the end in mind; rather, placemaking – the creation of new value by recycling existing components of the locality – is the motivation for engaging in their activities (Johnstone and Lionais, 2004).

The relationships between the built space and its users create a feedback loop that encourages transformation of the space and the community. The initial place becomes enhanced through iterative interactions with the community. Feedback and collaboration from newcomers to the existing social network and place can result in modifications to the concept or physical structure of the original place.

4.2. Built spaces as symbols of the entrepreneurial network in Gojome

The changes in Gojome created a new layer of complexity in the social dynamics of its community. The entry of new players in Gojome ushered in new collaborative ideas that are starting to transform the town. This is reminiscent of Mitchell (2013)’s idea of creative enhancement and creative destruction. The processes of creative destruction and creative enhancement have neither negative nor positive implications, but rather describes a displacement of an old landscape with a newer one (Mitchell, 2013). These built spaces are starting to transform Gojome by adding a new layer of social networks of younger rural entrepreneurs who have collaborated to produce new spaces for interaction in the town. However, despite the inherent neutrality of Mitchell (2013)’s concepts, the unfamiliarity of the built spaces can pose a deterrence to newcomers, who are unsure as to the etiquette or behaviour expected in the store, and therefore created social tension. Such was the case when an elderly resident respondent mentioned her hesitation to visit Ichi Cafe. This hesitation for other members of Gojome to participate in activities in these new spaces creates a “new” Gojome characterized by these new spaces and an “old” Gojome characterized by existing spaces, like a contradiction of space and time as discussed by Foucault (1986).

This study observes two barriers to entry to these built spaces. One is from strong social networks from those who have been involved in the creation and use of these spaces. Such strong networks can appear homogeneous and monolithic to newcomers and offer assumptions about the type of frequent customers visually apparent at the built spaces, therefore creating a seemingly unfriendly environment. The other is from the fact that the physical design of these spaces is clearly visually different and unfamiliar to older members of the community compared to that of existing spaces. As shown by Yanow (1995), the language of social interactions can be varied, even including non-verbal communication from artifacts such as art, architecture, and in this context, the built space. The type of built spaces created by the rural entrepreneurs are manifestly,

and inevitably, non-verbal forms of communication, whether they be intentional or not, leading to social tensions and changes as befits any kind of communication.

Kurochkina (2022), observed similar social tensions in a study on rural re-settlers in Japan. In that study, Kurochkina suggested that rural re-settlers inevitably participate in some form of “social resistance” whether it is against rural conventions or against a “conventional life-course of post-war urban Japan”. Furthermore, rural entrepreneurs who built these spaces think of them as a necessary social space for themselves as younger members of the community. Like the conclusions drawn by Klien (2022) of migrant behaviour in rural areas in Japan, these spaces have become a form of support for the rural entrepreneurs and like-minded supporters to maintain their identity and vision. However, this simultaneously creates a liminal and juxtaposing space existing adjacent to existing social networks or places, as the entrepreneur’s identities and visions tend to run against conventional or expected behaviours, and therefore engenders more social tension and “social resistance.” An unexpected result of entrepreneurial activities seems to have unintentionally created a boundary for some of the elderly in the community. It must be noted however, that in the team’s experience of the spaces, there were several elderlies who participated in placemaking, but they may be outliers, and further research needs to address how strategies can be better managed in aging communities. Gojome already had existing facilities that support the elderly, but very few support the younger generation due in part to its aging community. Therefore, these built spaces are very important to the younger generation, as well as the rural entrepreneurial network.

4.3. Policy implications and future research opportunities

National level policies promoting migration from urban cities to the rural countryside can inspire rural entrepreneurship. In Korsgaard’s (2015) piece, rural entrepreneurship was differentiated from entrepreneurship in the rural largely based on location and use of local natural and social resources. Gojome, as an aged community, can function as a case study to add a new component to this context. Rural revitalization officers had the privilege of choosing their destination and their main reason for choosing Gojome was because they knew somebody there. From the beginning, these officers’ decision to move to Gojome was predicated by an existing connection they had with Gojome. The case of Gojome demonstrates how new actors in the rural countryside who have had experiences, especially professional careers, from urban cities can create interventions in a locality. With the case of three rural revitalization officers, their decision to stay in Gojome after their three-year assignment, and then moving on to socially-oriented entrepreneurial ventures showed a transition from entrepreneurship in the rural-to-rural entrepreneurship (Korsgaard et al., 2015).

These key actors with strong interpersonal connections can be regarded as a catalyst in mediating relationships and bringing together different interests for a common goal (Cunha et al., 2020).

More research is needed to understand enabling factors for successful urban to rural migration and wider dissemination of rural entrepreneurship. Furthermore, the case of Gojome exhibits the unique characteristic of being an aged town, which is underexplored in literature. Further quantitative assessments to the wider community of Gojome can provide additional insights and expand on the results of this study. Alternative government programs aimed at attracting companies in mega cities like Tokyo to relocate their offices to rural areas can benefit from exploratory investigations like this to understand spatial and social impacts to affected local communities.

4.4. Limitations of the research

The methodology is limited by a number of factors. First, the network of rural entrepreneurs was accessed through a local coordinator, therefore the studied five projects do not represent all types of entrepreneurial activities in Gojome. These five projects have a commonality in terms of space utilization for business purposes. The presented results cannot be used to generalize the idea of rural entrepreneurship; however, this study mainly points to the roles of these spaces in rural entrepreneurship that will provide some key information about what elements to investigate when the role of space utilization is discussed in rural setting. Finally, the original data set is in Japanese, which was then translated into English and the discussions also mainly done in English. While this could sometimes risk loss of cultural nuances, this was avoided as the research team was comprised of Japanese and foreign researchers alike.

Although the results were interpreted within the social and cultural context of rural Japan, the authors seek to present the case of Gojome as an empirical contribution to the larger context of role spaces play in the disruption of the rural environment and its social network. The present study serves as inspiration for future research tackling the concepts pursued and debated on hereafter.

5. Conclusion

This research aimed to analyse the role that built spaces offer for rural entrepreneurship as well as a rural town's social networks. This was done through conversational interviewing, focused ethnography, and the use of Gojome, a rural town with an exceptional case of aging population located in Akita prefecture, as a case study. For entrepreneurs, built spaces offer an avenue to express themselves within the rural landscape. The outcome is an interplay between the built space, its providers, users, and other community relations that can be mapped as a circuitous trajectory spiralling outward. The initial entrepreneurial activity of revitalization officers in Gojome have expanded to local actors who have built their own spaces and activities themselves. However, these newly developed built spaces created unintended barriers especially for older members of the community to participate in the activities offered by the built spaces. Built spaces and the social networks of its users exhibit growth as time passes. Ultimately, this study revealed findings that help to illuminate how Gojome's rural entrepreneurs carve out spaces for themselves in Gojome's landscape. As the study is limited by its exploratory nature and temporal constraints, further research is warranted to explore more inclusive strategies for rural entrepreneurship in other parts of Japan and countries experiencing aging communities like Canada and South Korea. Multiyear and multi method investigations like mapping, surveys, or focused groups in Gojome and elsewhere are also worthwhile in our continued understanding of the complexities involved in improving sustainable development strategies for the aging rural.

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