

Mitigating urban decline through the compact city? Reflections on 15 years of urban recentralization policies in Japan

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Series: Shrinking Cities

To cope with a rapidly spreading and now pervasive phenomenon of urban decline, Japanese authorities have actively promoted “compact city” strategies. However, 15 years after the launch of the Urban Renaissance Special Measure Law, designed to rejuvenate the downtown areas of Japan’s largest cities, the neoliberal-oriented rationale that underpinned many compact city projects is now met with mixed opinions in Japan, especially in light of its contrasting effects on seniors’ access to urban resources.

“At a time when a process of nationwide depopulation is progressing, maximizing urban functions is our most pressing issue. The keyword for this is ‘compact city’”. This sentence is an excerpt from an article published by the *Mainichi Shimbun* newspaper on November 12, 2016, commenting a new set of measures implemented by the city of Akita.¹ It is one of the countless examples of the success that the terms “compact city” currently enjoy in Japan, a country whose population might decrease to less than 100 million inhabitants by 2050² (from 126.5 million according to the 2015 census). The spatial distribution of this demographic shrinkage is highly disparate. While it is expected that Tokyo’s city region might maintain slight growth until 2030 at least through positive net migration rates – both domestic and international – the rest of Japan is set to shrink, especially peripheral regions, where the number of inhabitants could fall by half. Between 2010 and 2015, two thirds of Japan’s 1,727 municipalities³ suffered a net population loss of more than 5%. Almost all of their governing assemblies have adopted master plans revolving around compact-city vocabulary, a move that the current government led by Abe Shinzō⁴ (who came into power in 2012) approves. It is indeed determined to push for the implementation of measures that encourage the concentration of revitalization initiatives and urban redevelopment projects in municipally designated “urban cores” (Komine 2015). The 2014 reform of the Local Autonomy Law has asserted the importance of “selecting” (*sentaku*) and “concentrating” (*shūchū*) areas where facilities adapted to the needs of a graying population can be built. In demographically declining municipalities, in 2015, the proportion of residents over 60 often exceeded 30%. With this in mind,

¹ Akita is located at the northern end of Japan’s main island. We translated the first lines of the article, which can be consulted in full (in Japanese) here: <http://mainichi.jp/articles/20161112/ddl/k05/020/053000c>.

² According to the scenarios of the National Institute of Population and Social Security Research: www.ipss.go.jp/site-ad/index_english/esuikai/gh2401e.asp.

³ From 1999 to 2010, the total number of Japanese municipalities was reduced from 3,232 to 1,727 following mergers, with the result that mid-sized cities and villages undergoing decline have become part of larger, still-growing cities (Nishihara 2015).

⁴ All Japanese personal names in this article are written in the order used in Japanese, i.e. family name followed by given name.

the Abe administration decided that the compact city (or *konpakuto shiti*) should constitute the key territorial dimension of its structural reform program (“Abenomics”).

The compact-city concept originates in English-speaking planning studies (Jenks *et al.* 1996); in its “best-practice manuals” addressed to local authorities, the Ministry of Land, Infrastructures, Transport and Tourism (MLIT) began to regularly promote the notion in the late 1990s. But how can we explain the growing interest of public and private Japanese stakeholders in this type of urban form, precisely when it started to draw criticism among Western researchers (Simmonds and Coombe 2000)? In this paper, we argue that the rise of pro-compact-city policies in Japan reveals a willingness on the part of central authorities to regulate the location of new real-estate production in order to improve the competitiveness of Japanese metropolises, in cooperation with the private sector, in a break with several decades of weak control over urban sprawl. It corresponds to a major reversal of city governance in Japan (Aveline-Dubach 2008) that is linked to the large-scale political, economic and social transformations experienced by the country since the late 1980s. By reflecting upon these changes, we want to show that the transfer of “compact city” ideas into the Japanese context results from path-dependent compromises between postwar developmentalist practices, and institutional logics driven by the pursuit of urban competitiveness on the global scene on the one hand and austerity budgeting on the other. The introduction of austerity into the ideological framework of public action dates back to the administrative reforms led during the Hashimoto Ryūtarō government (1996–1998) and those that followed (Mori Yoshirō and more prominently, Koizumi Jun’ichirō), under the influence of New Public Management ideas⁵ (Koike *et al.* 2007; Tsukamoto 2012). On a local level, a policy that seeks to restructure the urban fabric around mixed-use clusters certainly helps to improve daily mobilities, but only a very selective number of spaces and communities can benefit from subsequent demographic and fiscal gains. This means that the compact-city rationale may serve to justify greater disparities between repopulating and depopulating areas in contemporary Japan.

The case for greater proximity between humans and their resources

Defined as a “city of short distances,” the compact-city discourse enjoys a success that is primarily grounded in its value as an efficient tool with which to counter the negative impacts of urban decline on daily life in Japan. When decline deepens, vacant houses and brownfields haphazardly “perforate” urban fabrics (Baron *et al.* 2010), and shops or services are forced to close owing to a lack of customers, especially in commercial arteries offering a range of retail stores (Iwama 2011). In most cases, nobody takes over the lease, while nearby vacant houses are not maintained. In this way, newcomers are gradually deterred from arriving in a seemingly deteriorated, eerily empty neighborhood.

The scattering of remaining inhabitants and resources that urban decline entails is especially difficult (to identify, to preempt, etc.) given that Japanese villages, towns and large urban centers are usually characterized by land fragmentation as well as high human and built-up densities (Figure 1). In addition, Japan’s urbanization in the 20th century was largely based on the land value-capture strategies of railway companies, which had evolved into railway conglomerates: in the Kyoto–Osaka–Kobe region, from the 1920s onwards, these companies created subsidiaries that built residential neighborhoods around railway stations, and directly or indirectly managed a wide range of commercial, leisure and touristic activities (Aveline 2003). If the number of commuters and customers frequenting these railway hubs decreases significantly, the rail companies will consider downsizing (in terms of both service frequencies and staff numbers), which contradicts the needs of demographically declining municipalities, which want to keep efficient rail connections in order to attract new residents.

⁵ Inspired by the British experience, the expression “New Public Management” spread first among the committees in charge of reforming Japanese administrations during the 1990s. It was introduced as part of an effort to make public services more “efficient,” “transparent” and “businesslike”.

Figure 1. An aerial view of Fukuchiyama, a city of 78,000 inhabitants situated in the northern part of the Kyoto prefecture (about 20 miles/30 km from Kyoto)



Seen from above, we cannot imagine that one of the city’s main downtown commercial arteries is hollowed out. © Sophie Buhnik 2013.

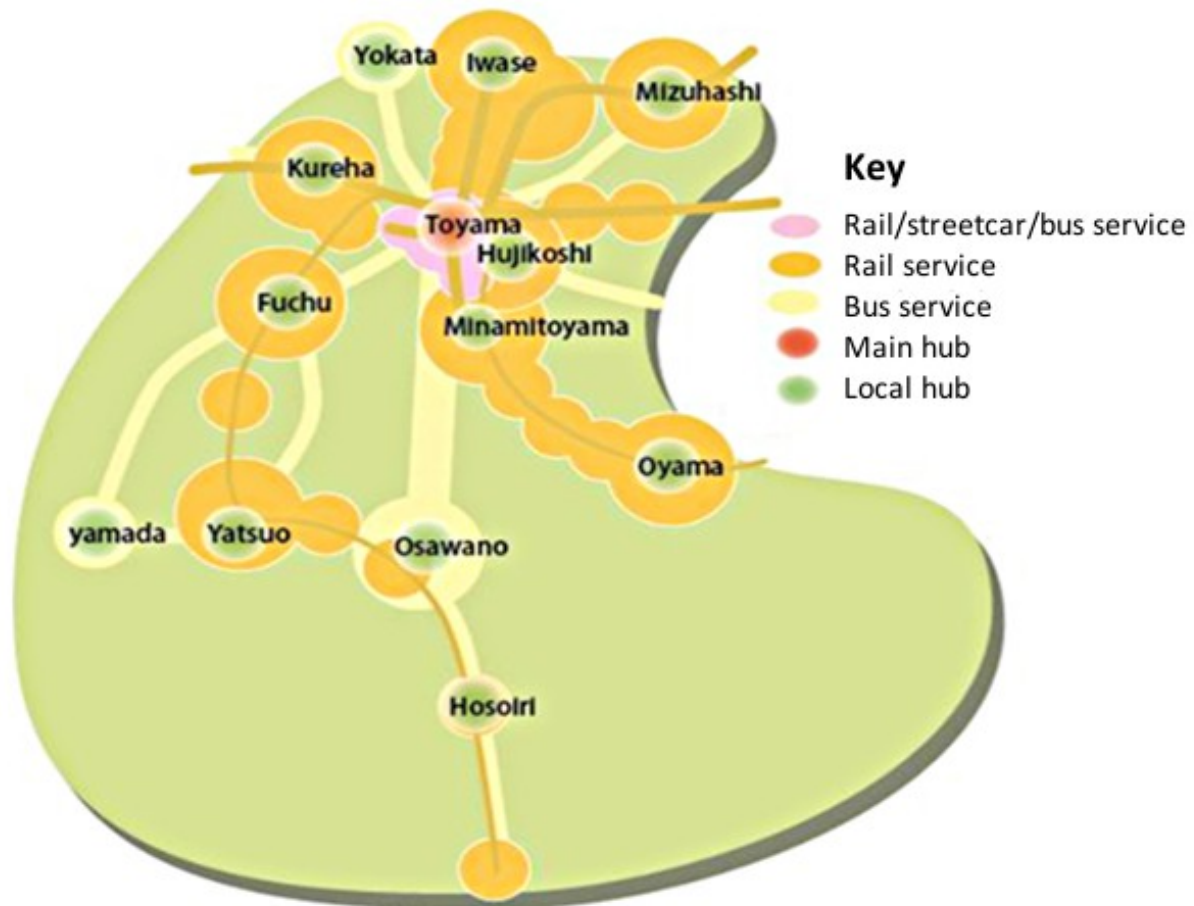
Since interurban and regional railway networks still link Japan’s major metropolitan hubs to smaller outlying cities, the state and local authorities agreed, upon the passing of the 2014 reform of the Local Autonomy Law,⁶ to establish “special priority revitalization areas,” preferably around downtown railway stations, within conurbations and chief regional cities (of prefectures) in particular. The channeling of public and private investment towards these special zones (encouraged by tax exemptions and *ad hoc* deregulations of the building code, such as floor-area ratios, for instance) aims to concentrate urban renewal projects in well-connected neighborhoods, especially with regard to housing projects adapted to senior mobilities. The long-term goal is to see Japanese

⁶ And in line with the decentralization reforms that were voted in the mid- to late 1990s (Koike *et al.* 2007).

cities evolve into “right-sized,” tightly defined polycentric settlements. The goal is also to bring back inhabitants to areas near shopping streets, whose economic and social role was considerably weakened by malls in the 1990s (Figure 1).

The city of Toyama’s master plan exemplifies this approach (Figure 2). As the chief city of Toyama prefecture, on the coast of the Sea of Japan, it had 400,000 inhabitants in 2010. Toyama is famous for having been the first Japanese municipality to rehabilitate streetcar traffic by opening a streetcar loop line corresponding to the limits of its historic center. In addition, senior citizens who move to housing in the city center can obtain a pass guaranteeing them discount fares on public transportation. According to a presentation made by city mayor Mori Masashi at the United Nations Centre for Regional Development, free streetcar tickets are given to customers who buy a bouquet at a designated flower shop.⁷ Following its recognition as a “compact-city model” by the OECD, Toyama is often heralded as an example of “best practice” in contemporary Japanese urban production, and indeed has been awarded other labels and distinctions within the context of other national programs or partnerships with international agencies (smart city, resilient city, etc.). It could accumulate several state-supported urban renewal or transit-oriented projects (like a bicycle sharing system) aimed at stimulating private investment (e.g. the Toyama Glass Art Museum and City Public Library building designed by architect Kuma Kengo).

Figure 2. An excerpt from the city of Toyama’s master plan



This “dumplings and skewers” representation of Toyama’s compact-city strategy can also be found on the websites of the Ministry of Environment and the MLIT. Source: City of Toyama.

⁷ See the presentation here: www.uncrd.or.jp/content/documents/7EST-Keynote2.pdf.

The great transformation of Japan's development pillars and the institutionalization of compact-city discourses

Through Toyama's newfound reputation as a model of sustainable urban development, we can also observe that "best practice" regarding the compact city is also grounded in a shared feeling that the pillars of Japan postwar growth have become null and void (Aveline-Dubach 2014). Up until the 1990s, the expectation of continuously rising land prices constituted powerful financial leverage for private and public actors, while households were convinced to purchase property in suburbs adjusted to the needs of nuclear families. Following the burst of an enormous real-estate and financial bubble in 1991, the fact that increasingly worrying demographic projections superimposed itself on Japan's "Lost Decade" has undermined the economic and social bases upon which postwar growth was founded. The relation between family structure, housing and social transition is particularly important (Hirayama and Ronald 2008).

In this respect, Toyama's case is regularly labeled a model by the MLIT, as its recentralization strategy has indeed stimulated inward mobilities toward downtown Toyama from suburbs developed during the 1970s and 1980s. Advocates for reinforcing Toyama's regional weight and outreach (which was without doubt diminished by urban sprawl) underline that inward mobilities on the part of elderly households is a smart answer to the issues raised by the transformation of care relations between parents and children in Japan. If we take into account the fact that the generations born after 1975 are less numerous than those before them, and that the female employment rate is likely to rise to offset the expected shrinkage of the workforce, seniors may have to "rely less on their children" to help them for everyday help (Komine 2015). If their children cannot drive them between their home and shopping places or hospitals (for the elderly households who live in car-dependent areas), then a walkable distance to various services is deemed crucial to avoid their isolation. Moreover, increases in the proportion of irregular employment and in the number of dual-income households (and related issues of work-life balance) have a strong influence on the residential choices of younger Japanese residents (Koizumi *et al.* 2011). These are all incentives for inward mobilities.

Maintaining urban competitiveness amid nationwide demographic degrowth

In the late 1990s, while members of the Liberal Democratic Party that governed Japan at the time began to push for austerity budgeting, central administrations were advised by the Strategic Economic Council to focus more clearly on the enhancement of Tokyo's global competitiveness – described as the engine of Japan's economic recovery, tacitly setting aside several plans favoring more balanced regional development (Tsukamoto 2012). Two major urban and regional planning reforms were subsequently voted: first, a decentralization reform that took effect in 2000; and second, the Urban Renaissance Law of 2002. The former was bent on paring back redistributive mechanisms (with the aim of correcting wealth gaps between territories), while the latter allowed for the designation of priority urban renaissance zones: half of them were situated in downtown Tokyo, and about a quarter were shared between Osaka and Nagoya. As condominium housing was built near or within many of these perimeters (Kubo and Yui 2011), Tokyo (first of all) and other metropolitan cores (subsequently) experienced significant demographic gains. But in a country shrinking as a whole, this has necessarily reinforced the decline of less attractive residential areas.

It is thus interesting that the MLIT guidelines and white papers heavily promoting compact-city policies were released at the same time as these reforms. In a sense, compact-city discourses have legitimized institutional changes leaning towards austerity budgeting, urban entrepreneurialism and support for Tokyo as Japan's main world city. In reaction, the governors of non-metropolitan prefectures and the mayors of non-metropolitan municipalities have protested against the overconcentration of people and resources in the capital, especially after the 2011 Tōhoku mega-earthquake that destroyed already rapidly declining peripheries on Honshu, Japan's main island. It

partly explains why Prime Minister Abe and his administration accepts that to give chief regional cities the ability to designate revitalization areas that resemble the urban-renaissance zones designated by the 2002 law, and the ability to restrict building permits beyond the limits of said zones.⁸ But for the suburban residents living far away from these areas and the municipalities that form the suburbs of regional cities like Toyama, these measures are regarded as a tool to “peripheralize” urban degrowth away from historic centers that are better able to welcome more touristic flows and knowledge-based projects, and toward the urban margins, in a way that may reinforce inequalities of access to urban resources on a regional scale. When practiced by suburban households, inward mobility can improve spatial accessibility, but it threatens the mutual assistance that neighbors who age in the same suburban area are used to providing one another (Yahagi 2009; Buhnik 2015). For political scientist Tsuji Takuya, one solution would be to prompt the core municipalities of conurbations to sign cooperation agreements with neighboring municipalities, so as to tackle the issue of access to re-concentrated public health services from aging, de-densifying peripheral areas. Lastly, in cases where small cities have merged with larger ones, it would be preferable to encourage administrative specializations (housing services in one former town hall, transportation in another, and so on) instead of the rationalization of existing facilities, in order to avoid abrupt shutdowns of shops around closed public buildings (Tsuji 2013).

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⁸ And “[i]n fiscal 2016, the Abe administration introduced new grants to local governments eager to push projects for such purposes as industrial innovation, promoting migration to their areas and improvement of the work–life balance”. Source: *Japan Times*, editorial, January 7, 2017. URL: www.japantimes.co.jp/opinion/2017/01/09/editorials/promoting-local-autonomy.

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