

# Settlement planning through linking people

## A participatory approach of the Kitagata project in Japan

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### Introduction

The Kitagata Project was one of the pioneering cases of participatory settlement development in urban low-income communities in Japan. In recognition of the achievement, the Architectural Institute of Japan awarded a prize of honour to the City of Kitakyushu and an independent planning team, the Wakatake Planning Institute, in 1994. The points cited were:

- efficiency in implementing an improvement project for a large-scale low-income settlement;
- the role of planners as an intermediary between government and people, facilitating their partnership in the process of environmental upgrading;
- innovative attempt for house design reflecting 'a joy of living collectively'; and
- organisation of a series of participatory activities in planning and implementation.

However, the Project's participatory approaches have not been documented much in the past.

Meanwhile, there has been a notable change since the mid 1990s in the urban context of Japan. Community workshops are increasingly held as a planning technique. Several local authorities tend to create a system of financially assisting local communities in engaging private consultants for settlement development proposals. Many of such latest attempts can be found rooted in the Kitagata project. This paper briefly introduces the background, processes and methods of community participation in Kitagata.

### *Buraku* communities in Japan

*Buraku* means a small settlement in Japanese, but it also refers to an area where socially discriminated people live. According to an estimate, there are some 6,000 *Buraku* settlements all over the country that house more than 3 million people. Families originated from *Buraku* communities were unduly discriminated against for hundreds of years in terms of occupation, residence, marriage and living conditions. The prejudice still persists and occasionally, there are incidences of implicit or explicit social segregation and harassment against *Buraku* people.

Since the 1920s, a strong nation-wide movement has been organised by *Buraku* people for their own human rights protection and liberation. In 1955, the *Buraku* Liberation

League (BLL) was established, consisting of community-level organisations of *Buraku* people, federated at the prefecture and national levels. BLL declared that it should be an integral part of the overall liberation of *Buraku* to claim improved housing and common amenities in their settlements. In 1969, the Government admitted its responsibilities to resolve the *Buraku* issues and a special time-bound law was enacted to facilitate the improvement of designated *Buraku* areas. The Law and subsequent series of legislation specified, among others, that local projects for *Buraku* settlement improvement would receive the central subsidy equivalent of two-thirds of municipal spending and that municipal authorities could issue local bonds for relevant projects under liberalised conditions.

### The settings

Kitagata, a large *Buraku* community of 4,100 people, is located in Kitakyushu City in southern Japan. It is currently served by a good transport link from the city centre, and its living environment has been much improved. Until recently, however, it was a poor, congested, low-lying area with very narrow roads and little public space along a river (see Figure 1). There were no squatter residents. A majority of people lived in rental apartments on private land. But 58% of the total 1,920 housing units in the area were identified as substandard by official criteria.

Largely speaking, there were four major socio-economic groups in the area. The first consisted of those employed by the city authority as field manual labourers such as in garbage collection. The second group was specific to Kitagata. There are publicly operated horse race and cycle race fields adjacent to the area. Many local residents were engaged in various types of small jobs connected to race and lottery operation. The third was local entrepreneurs and their employees. A majority of them were small contractors and construction workers. The fourth group was those living on social welfare grants from the local government. Employment of the first and second groups was considered as a gain from the *Buraku* movement, as the local government was amenable to providing job opportunities preferentially to residents in Kitagata.

The Kitagata community repeatedly requested physical improvement of their environment. However, it was not until 1982 when the City's Advisory Board stressed a need

**Figure 1 The Kitagata area before the Project**

Photo: Kitakyushu Municipal Office



for a comprehensive programme for the area, that the local community and the government reached a consensus to initiate a large-scale project. In June 1983, twenty-one local representatives of neighbourhood associations from Kitagata and surrounding areas formed the Kitagata Area Environmental Improvement Promotion Council (hereafter known as 'the Council'). The City recognised the Council as the only representative body of people for the project. The BLL local branch was not formally represented at the Council, in order to secure local political balance, but a majority of the Council members belonged to BLL.

On the other hand, the City Government engaged a planning consultancy team from the Wakatake Planning Institute to work with people and formulate a redevelopment plan. Mr. Youkou Hatakenaka and two younger colleagues from Wakatake rented a small house in the area and started to live there. This was in August 1983, and Hatakenaka's resident work in the area continued for six years. At first people were suspicious. The team visited communal places, talked to people and tried to get recognised. People often had casual conversation in small lanes and public baths and the team met and exchanged views with them at these places. On various occasions, the team clarified its position, listened to people's desires and anxieties, and encouraged them to participate in community meetings and planning workshops (see Box 1).

### **Box 1 Community workshop modules developed by Wakatake**

The community workshop is a tool for consensus building. It is not a formal meeting, but is arranged in such a way that every participant enjoys, contributes, plays and understands. In principle, every household should participate. If the area is too large, planners will organise a model workshop for representatives of various neighbourhoods. Then these leaders will each organise a similar workshop in the respective neighbourhood, assisted by the planners. Based on the experience in Kitagata and other areas, the Wakatake Institute developed modules of workshops. The following is a more or less standardised process currently practised by the Wakatake team in various settlements.

#### **WORKSHOP 1: Slide show**

Good development initiatives in other areas, as well as issues involved, are introduced.

#### **WORKSHOP 2: Town watch**

After groups walk around their own area, they discuss 'what in this community do we like, why?' 'What in this community do we hate, why?' They map and list the attractiveness and problems identified (see Fig.2).

#### **WORKSHOP 3: Work out a future image**

Each group identifies the future goals based on the outcome of last workshop. Put illustrations, pictures and statements on a map. Make presentations.

#### **WORKSHOP 4: Discuss alternatives**

Compare two alternative plan proposals prepared by planners (workshop conductors). Discuss in groups whether their wishes have been incorporated; what are the advantages and disadvantages of each plan. Hold consultation with planners and city officials present. Select by vote which plan is relatively better.

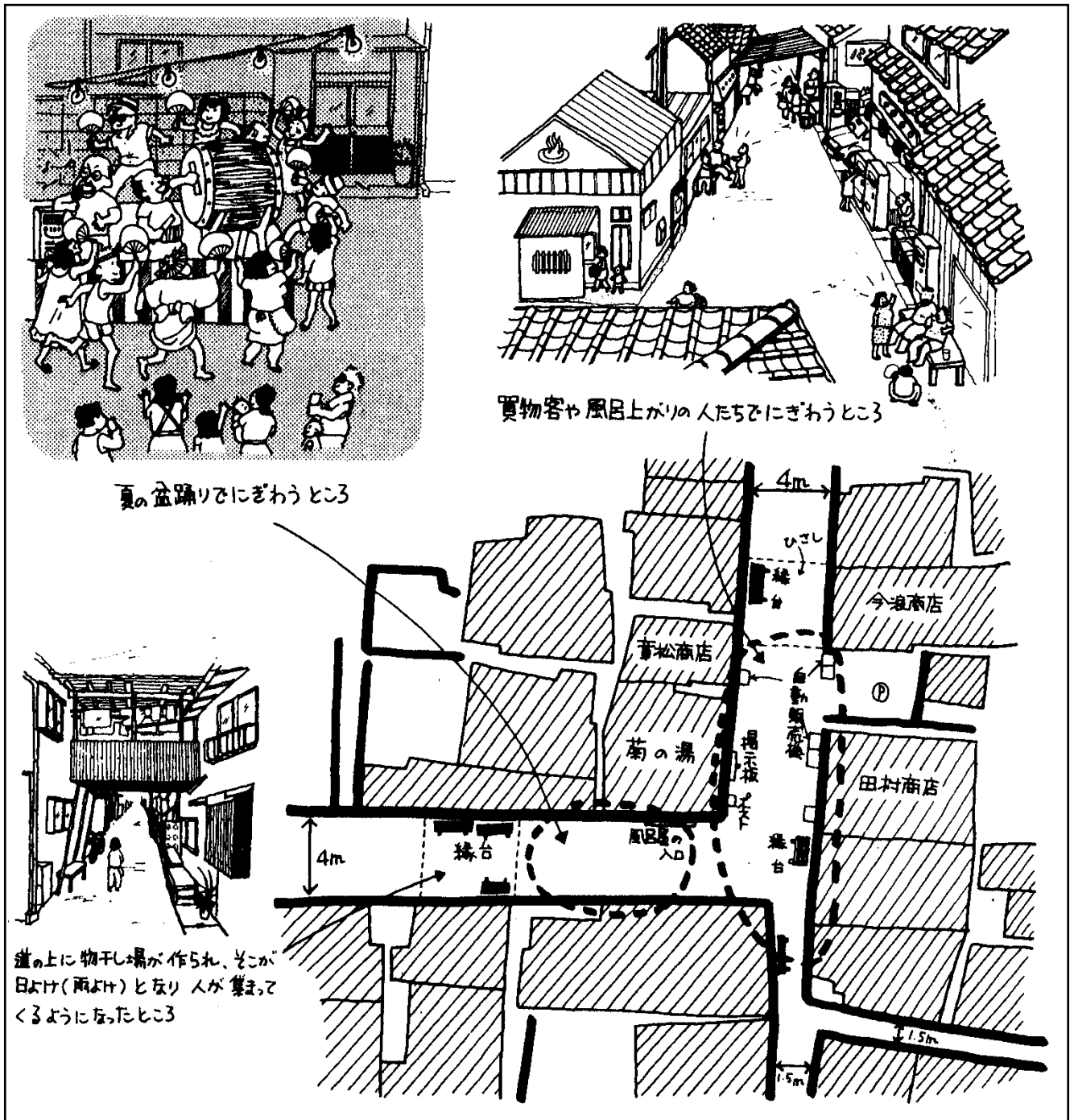
#### **WORKSHOP 5: Examine a proposal**

Planners present an elaborate plan based on the alternative selected at last workshop. A larger scale map (normally 1/1000) or model is used for discussion. Participants examine how their individual houses are being dealt with. Groups are organised by neighbourhood (normally 15 households each) and should consolidate their comments.

#### **WORKSHOP 6: Approve a plan**

Planners present a revised proposal. Review the proposal. If OK, approve by consensus. Then planners will finalise the plan for official sanction and implementation.

**Figure 2 Workshop findings:** Narrow street corners used for chatting and festivals; Self-built elevated corridor providing space for drying laundries as well as shade underneath



Courtesy of Wakatake Planning Institute

## Planning

The first planning task was to organise a series of awareness-raising workshops in five sub-areas. The purpose was to get the concept of a Buraku improvement scheme understood. In some workshops, however, the number of planners (Hatakenaka's team and city officials) exceeded

<sup>1</sup> This is a participatory exercise in which participants are led along streets of their own community, with pens, paper, cameras and tape recorders, to try to collectively discover from a 'planning point of view' things they like to maintain and things they want to change in the town.

that of local residents. It showed considerable mistrust on the part of people in the city administration: in the past, plans had been proposed one after another and shelved. It was understandable that people were less interested in participating in government-initiated exercises. Hatakenaka and BLL members prepared for an event called 'Kitagata labyrinth exploration'. Leaders identified courses for the 'town watch'<sup>1</sup> and made arrangements for games to be organised at various spots along the courses. Local organisations of women, young and elderly people were involved in making traditional tools for games such as bamboo horses and straw sandals. More than 400 children

and adults participated in this walking exercise, and they discovered the attractiveness of the old town space. It was significant because people felt themselves to be discriminated against and hence confined to sub-standard living environment, losing self-confidence as a result.

Meanwhile, the planning team undertook a physical survey of the area and interviewed local residents. They compiled the results for people to understand easily. These were presented at meetings of the Council. Issues and problems of the area were reviewed and identified at these occasions and shared among the representatives sitting in the Council, the local government officers and planners. Broad strategies for improvement gradually emerged.

The planning team then encouraged the leaders of the Council to conduct workshops in their own sub-areas. The purpose was for local people to review the observations expressed by planners and the Council. Moreover, it was expected that the Council would be made a genuine and active partner through these actions. This time, the number of participants was greatly increased. It was evident that people sensed that the government was now determined and serious.

However, it was still essential to maintain a good communication flow between the local leadership and residents in general, as every family was not present at the workshops. Therefore, the planners decided to issue

newsletters. It was agreed that the planning team would prepare text and layout while the Council would be responsible for supervision, correction and distribution of the newsletters. It was expected that, through this process, the local leaders in the Council would have face-to-face interaction with the residents, leading to the establishment of self-motivated leadership. Kitagata, being a settlement which is discriminated against, the literacy rate in the area was relatively low. Thus, to aid comprehension of all residents, professional jargon was avoided and simple words were used in the newsletters. Beginning with the publication of the newsletter, a new relationship was developed: the planners became 'assistants' in the overall planning and management of the Council. More than 100 meetings and workshops were held for and by the Council with assistance from the planners.

A questionnaire survey was administered by the Council on the individual families' willingness to join an improvement project and their plans to dispose of their properties. Based on these initial views expressed by people, Hatakenaka's team worked out the first draft plan of improvement. The plan proposed a combination of strategies in which some sites would be upgraded while public housing would be placed on other sites undergoing redevelopment.

Hatakenaka expected that the authorities would soon release the draft for discussion by the residents. Then an interactive process for plan making through partnership

## Box 2 Participatory housing design

The word *moyai*, linking people and sharing with each other, was traditionally used in the local community of Kitagata. This concept was reflected in its physical neighbourhood pattern as well as the social relationship between individuals and the community. In order to maintain this quality, it was not enough to provide a well-designed house plan ensuring continuity of life style, but it called for a new planning paradigm that would allow the space creation and control by the dwellers even on public rental housing.

Through workshops and discussions on house design, people regained the spirit of collective work and self-control. For example, at first they demanded a meeting hall rather than open space in the building. After several discussions, the consensus reached was for them to construct a meeting place after the building is completed. At the initial workshops, people gathered as 'guests' and demanded their claims, while planners and officers were the 'hosts' and answered their questions. This gradually changed. People became an active proposer of new ideas. During the construction, people often went to the site, watched excitedly, offered foods to workers, and 'supervised' the work. It was as if they had acted as a client of an owner-occupied house.

Physically speaking, a basic unit consisted of three bedrooms with 6 *tatami* mats, a dining-cum-kitchen, a bath and toilet. The plan was flexible enough to be adjusted to the individual family's needs. Some units had a 3-square metre free space, the location and use of which were decided by the dweller. Semi-public external space was kept as much as possible, to promote interaction among the residents.

*Roji* (small lanes) and *kado* (front yards of individual houses facing the lane) were found to be essential elements to sustain the *moyai* relationship in the original community. Hence design efforts were made for resurgence of *roji* and *kado* in the walk-up public housing. The individual balconies were connected with corridors, placed comfortably on the south side.

Outside the entrance of each unit was there a half-enclosed space of 10-25 square metres. In order to make the distinction between public and private spaces even fuzzier, a sliding door was used for the entrance, and the entrance space was directly connected to the dining room. There was some legal difficulty in installing sliding doors, but the City's Building Bureau applied regulatory conditions very flexibly to accommodate the workshop results. A few years after the completion, one can observe a variety of use of the above spaces. Alteration and creation of space and of space use are continuously evolving<sup>2</sup>.

<sup>2</sup> Adapted from: Y. Endoh and S. Yokoyama, "Treasure of *Roji* culture", AT June 1993, in Japanese, pp.35-43.

would have started immediately. However, in reality, the city hall spent seven months examining the draft in detail in terms of its consistency and how it could be implemented from various sectoral points of view. The Council, with Hatakenaka's advice, sent the mayor an official request for early release. The city officials felt that the draft required careful scrutiny, as once people agreed, it had to be immediately sent to the central government for subsidy application.

As soon as the draft was officially released to the public by the city authority, the planners organised a number of presentation sessions with residents groups. These were to sound out responses from people. Hatakenaka initially prepared and showed a planning map of 1/1000. People wanted one on a larger-scale, indicating the names of individual house owners on the map. The whole area was broken into 10 units and in each of these, an evening workshop was conducted. In most cases, meeting places were full of participants. Newsletters also publicised the draft plan.

After a planning map of 1/500 was prepared, another series of workshops was organised. People were keen to have a closer look at how their dwelling units were being dealt with. The rate of attendance was certainly improved, and participants' opinions became more specific. Many in the proposed redevelopment site were concerned about the level of compensation for their existing land and house since the local government would purchase the individual land and house for clearance purposes. A large number of people wanted their houses to be left intact. It was agreed to take full note of these wishes in the detailed planning, unless the locations of the properties in question were required for basic infrastructure improvement. A revised plan (1/500) prepared after the workshops was raised on a notice board in each of the 10 area units, and a 'consultation corner' was opened in the community centre of the area. Hatakenaka's team and city officials in charge were always sitting in this corner for a week in order to respond to questions and suggestions from people on the revised plan.

## House design

In 1987, Professor Y. Endoh<sup>3</sup> was invited to co-ordinate a survey on the living pattern in the area. In the course of the survey, a word expressed by an old woman caught the survey team's attention. She said, "*We used to have a moyai well to get water*", or "*I would take a bath through moyai*". *Moyai* is not a very common Japanese word, but it means linking people and doing things together. This showed the culture of sharing and helping each other as a

<sup>3</sup> Dr. Yasuhiro Endoh is currently a professor of architecture and planning at Department of Urban Environmental System of Chiba University, near Tokyo. He is a well-known practitioner of participatory methodologies in urban community development, and worked with a number of local authorities and community groups (<http://www.comnet.tu.chiba-u.ac.jp>)

**Figure 3 Public housing completed with moyai concept**



Photo: Kitakyushu Municipal Office

life style in Kitagata. For example, narrow lanes that used to be considered as an indicator of substandard settlement conditions were found to be an essential element for people to plant flowers, talk and play, and care for neighbours. The planners decided to make *moyai* the key concept in their design policies.

Endoh's team of architects prepared a model of multi-family dwellings at the scale of 1/50, and organised community workshops. People actively responded and offered suggestions to the model. One concrete example, which was borne out of the workshops, was the introduction of common corridors on the southern side of the building. This was intended to emphasise the function of traditional small lanes as a space for interactive activities among neighbours. This function was now to be taken over by common corridors on upper floors. It was very unique that a multi-family house had a corridor on the south with the advantage of sunshine and breeze.

The participatory housing design process had been introduced to a small number of co-operative housing projects in Japan. But the Kitagata case was the first application in public housing. Residents to be rehoused in the area were invited to become project participants (namely future dwellers). They discussed their housing needs and preferences at workshops with architects and city officials. There were often thrilling debates between designers and people and also among the people themselves.

In August 1989, the community finally agreed to the layout of the first dwelling units and worked out a policy to allocate the units among the participants. Families with handicapped and aged members were given preferential rights to selection. Those who had a propensity for cleaning were allocated units on the ground floor and asked to be maintenance managers. Perhaps, the *Moyai* principle traditionally cultivated in discriminated communities was revived through the participatory exercises, resulting in collective formulation of such self-governing rules.

## Settlement management

Efforts were made to award construction contracts related to the Kitagata Project to local contractors in the area. In 1993 the implementation of the Project was completed (see Figure.3). The Council was now concerned with the maintenance of the area. The City again formally engaged Hatakenaka. This time his major task was to encourage people to think about maintenance and management. For example, there were some new public housing flats where the dwellers did not know each other, as they originated from five different neighbourhood associations in the project area. Hatakenaka and Endoh organised an open-air slide show under the stars, using a public open space in the estate. This event led to monthly study sessions of residents reorganised for each multi-family building in order to discuss the maintenance of common space and buildings. Besides the physical construction work, social and economic programmes in the field of adult literacy classes, a job information service and employment mediation and city-wide human rights education were also implemented by the city government. According to the latest survey on the living pattern of Kitagata in September 1999, the people's satisfaction is much higher in dwellings borne out of the participatory process than in conventional public housing.

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### Notes

Another group that may be interesting is the Asian Coalition for Housing Rights-Japan (ACHR-Japan). A small group of planners and researchers, including the author, concerned with community participation in urban low-income development and experience sharing with other countries. Their web site is as follows (an English page is yet to be prepared):

<http://www3.itakura.toyo.ac.jp/projects/achrj> (please note that you may need a Japanese language plug-in for your browser to view these pages).

For more details on ACHR, please refer to the RCPLA Network pages.