



Creativity in a shrinking society: A case study of the Water and Land Niigata Art Festival



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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the social roles of creativity in a *Shrinking Society* (a society with a decreasing population, a falling birth rate, and ageing members). This was accomplished by studying an Art Project in Niigata using field research and interviews with the Project's participants, including the artists, curators, and local residents. Art Projects are cultural movements that commenced in the 1990s. One characteristic of Art Projects is that they not only use cultural facilities to display works of art, but also develop creative activities centred on contemporary art, featuring civic participation and cooperation, while utilizing social spaces, such as closed schools and abandoned residences. Another feature of Art Projects is that they have strong connections with community revitalization in a Shrinking Society. In 2005, New Niigata city was established by the mergence of 15 towns, with the intention of heightening the autonomy and sustainability of the local community within a shrinking society. In 2009, a new Art Project, the 'Water and Land Niigata Art Festival' was initiated. The Art Project's central focus was on providing an identity for the new city and to revitalise communities, through civic participation and cooperation. This case study shows that Art Projects can foster new citizen-led cultural and societal engagement. In this process, each citizen's creativity plays a significant role, not just the creativity of the "Creative Class", such as artists. However, since specific community revitalisation goals, such as 'the establishment of a new city identity', may risk limiting the possibilities of their creativities, an approach that guarantees freedom to include diverse viewpoints that work alongside the creative engagement also requires close and continuous attention. This case study of an Art Project in Japan provides insights into the effectiveness of creativity, along with the culture, created for community revitalisation in a shrinking society.

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1. Scope and methodology

Japan is currently facing an era of a rapidly shrinking society, that is, a society in which the birth rate is low and the population is ageing and decreasing in size. According to the Japanese government's Cabinet Office, in 2013, 25.1% of the population was already over 65, a number that will increase to approximately 40% by 2060. During this time, it is estimated that the overall population will shrink by as much as 30%. Japan's society has already aged to an extent that no country in the world has had to face and it is expected to continue to age even more. In the context of this shrinking society, community revitalisation, which aims for the sustainable development of local society, has emerged as an important topic in Japan's field of community development, seeking to construct and coordinate relationships between people. Japan's government and its municipalities are adopting various related policies, asserting the necessity of a method of community revitalisation that uses each place's locality and heightens the autonomy and sustainability of local society.

Culture and the creativity that supports it has been gathering attention as one promising method for doing so, and as will be described below, various cultural projects that aim for community revitalisation are being implemented. However, are these projects really effective

for community revitalisation in a shrinking society? If they are, what kinds of possibilities and/or issues do they represent?

Discussions regarding the relationship between community development and creativity are still limited; however, some forerunning researchers have made several points. One example was the observation made by Jacobs (1984) concerning the importance of the quality of labour in the transition to an urban economy from a national economy in the era of the post-Fordist style of manufacturing. She identified that the crucial factor for the development of nation-states and cities is not the issuance of policies that attract industry, but the mechanism by which citizens' creativity is entirely utilised. By providing tangible examples from all over the world, she demonstrated that original ideas are precisely what invigorate cities, and conversely, if these original ideas are lacking, a city begins to decline. In addition, Landry (2000) pointed out that creativity could lead to further urban development, even when faced with financial collapse and deindustrialisation, as was the case in Europe. He indicated the usefulness of creativity for employment and economic growth in post-industrial cities through an analysis of successful cases of urban regeneration via creativity. Additionally, he explained that cities have overcome various problems through new innovation inspired by creativity, and this made cities livelier and easier places to live in. Florida (2002,

2005), however, focused on the role fulfilled by creative talents in the economic sphere. Furthermore, he discussed the appearance and rise to power of the Creative Class as the party that was responsible for creating a new economy. He stated that attracting factories was not as important as attracting creative and talented people for the stimulation of the urban industry. Therefore, he revealed that cultivating the senses of tolerance, diversity, and openness that were shared in the city, including for much of the Creative Class, was important for urban invigoration.

There have also been several studies from the East Asian region regarding the relationship between community development and creativity. Sasaki (1997, 2001) analysed the process of the formation of a Creative City in Kanazawa and Yokohama. He explained that it is important to develop culture and creative activities that utilise a city's history and individuality and that it is not essential to expand the manufacturing industry to form industrial projects. Additionally, there have been case studies conducted on cities, such as Kinmen, Shanghai, Gwangju and Yokohama. For urban regeneration projects, these case studies revealed the importance of a cooperative partnership between the stakeholders in cultural initiatives. These studies also determine the traits exhibited by the formation of the environment in Creative Cities and the issues associated with the inclusion or exclusion of creativity that occurs during the redevelopment of a city. Moreover, these studies emphasise the importance of the interactions between the bureaucracy and the citizens, and those among the citizens in the cultural endeavours, born from plans for economic growth drafted by bureaucrats (Sasajima, 2012; Shin & Stevens, 2013; Wang, 2009; Yang & Hsing, 2001; Yusuf & Nabeshima, 2005).

In other words, these studies have clarified the importance of, and conditions for culture and the creativity that supports it in community development. However, discussions regarding the relationship between community development and culture, as well as creativity, have not been adequately conducted during a shrinking society. Therefore, this paper considers the current state of Japanese society, which is shrinking at a rate rarely seen worldwide. It specifically focuses on the case of the 'Water and Land Niigata Art Festival' (Niigata City), a cultural project that aims for the sustainable development of local society through new cultural creation, and discusses the relationship between community development and creativity, in context with Japan's current social climate. As part of community development in a shrinking society, we must ask whether culture and creativity are effective for community revitalisation (particularly in the sense of the promotion of new culture and societal activities rather than that of the revival of industry).

Firstly, this paper discusses the recent flourishing of cultural projects involving civic participation and cooperation that aims for community revitalisation in Japan (Section 2). Next, I will provide an overview of the characteristics of the Water and Land Niigata Art Festival. Then, using as an example the artistic activities of 'Nuttari Radio', I will discuss how citizens are being prompted by artistic activities that involve civic participation and cooperation to start new cultural and societal endeavours, and also indicate the significance of this participation (Sections 3 and 4). Furthermore, I will discuss challenges faced. Those involved in the art festival are concerned that its goal of 'the establishment of a new identity for the city' will restrict the framework of its cultural activities (Section 5).

In addition to a literature survey, this study uses as primary sources the results of a field survey of the Water and Land Niigata Art Festival and Nuttari Radio carried out between August 2012 and August 2015 as well as those of an interview survey of a total of twenty artists, directors and community residents. These interviews were carried out on 1 January 2014 and 15 August 2015 at Najirane-Beya in Niigata City and at HOSPITALE PROJECT and SAKAE 401 in Tottori City.

2. The flourishing of art projects for community revitalisation

This study will analyse 'art projects (hereafter, APs)' as examples of initiatives planned for community revitalisation through creativity in

the era of shrinking societies. APs are cultural movements that commenced in the 1990s, after which they have continued to increase. APs are currently flourishing to the extent that more than 100 are held annually all over Japan. Some characteristics of APs are that they not only use cultural facilities to display works of art but also develop creative activities centred on contemporary art, featuring civic participation and cooperation, while using social spaces such as closed schools and abandoned residences. Strong connection to community revitalisation is another feature of APs. Representative examples include the 'Echigo-Tsumari Art Triennial' that began in 2000 in a hilly and mountainous region in Niigata Prefecture, the 'BEPPU PROJECT' that started in 2005 in Beppu City's hot springs area and the 'Aichi Triennale, Chojamachi Project' that began in 2010 in Nagoya's old textile district. As can be seen by other municipalities' taking considerable notice of these 'successful examples', interest in APs as a community revitalisation measure is increasing (Kumakura et al., 2014).

Why are APs that aim for community revitalisation and involve the participation and cooperation of citizens so actively developing in Japan? First, let us consider the societal background. Since modernisation in the latter half of the 19th century, where the formation of a nation-state was the goal, cultural policies, wherein the main focus was on establishing a national identity, have been promoted in Japan. These policies were promoted mainly by the central government, and they consisted of the importation and promotion of selected Western arts and the protection of similarly styled Japanese folk art. After World War II, the argument for protecting folk art was temporarily stagnant, but the centralised power's promotion of culture was maintained (Kobayashi et al., 2009). However, from the 1970s–80s onwards, efforts gradually began to appear that aimed not for centralised cultural revitalisation, but rather for cultural policies that used each locality's unique characteristics and community residents' initiative. One of the factors in the background contributing to this was a heightened interest in citizen-led community development. In the 1980s, a situation emerged throughout the country in which the natural environments and civic spaces as 'those spaces in which people of different origins and walks of life can mingle without overt control by government, commercial or other private interests or *de facto* dominance by one group over another' (Douglass, Ho, & Ooi, 2008: 5) were being taken away. This was due to the development of resorts based on national development plans carried out by private property developers, which was encouraged by the loosening of restrictions on the private sector (Douglass, Ho, & Ooi, 2002; Yoshimi, 2009). In response, residents of various communities began to object to centralised national land development plans. However, they did not simply oppose development as the traditional left did. They crafted a movement in which both those favouring and those opposing development emphasised establishing places and processes through which community residents could independently engage in discussions. This movement led to others that aimed to carry out not only land development but also citizen-led overall community development that included culture, social services and so on. Gradually, these movements began to change the municipalities (Ito et al., 2005; Tamura, 1995; Yoshimi, 2009). In the realm of cultural policies as well, there was a gradual heightening of interest in the policies led by community residents. Some citizens gradually realised the necessity of shifting to cultural policies that emphasised a bottom-up approach stressing the common consent of residents, rather than primarily attaching importance to the top-down approach of government led policies (Kobayashi et al., 2003). Furthermore, in the 2000s, a shrinking society resulted in focusing people's interest on citizen-led community development and particularly on community revitalisation. A sense of crisis regarding the survival of communities turned citizens' and municipalities' attention towards the issue. These trends towards community development, which emphasised the initiative of citizens and the heightened interest in community revitalisation, contributed to an increase in citizen-participation and cooperation-based APs that aimed for this revitalisation.

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