

## The Creative Town Model: Towards an alternative regional development model led by regenerating historic urban centers

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### Abstract

The traditional Industrial Town Model (ITM), which has dominated the Japanese policy for regional (local) economic growth since 1960s, focuses on attracting outside industrial companies to the region. However, it has been ineffective since many companies have failed to survive the rapid change in the economic structure. Moreover, the continual shrinkage of Japanese population combined with the declining of the provincial areas and their capitals have been an inescapable challenge for regenerating historic urban centers when there is slow economic growth. For any urban regeneration model to succeed, it needs not only basic industries and physical preservation-led schemes, but also intrinsic industries that can create competitive local identities. We argue that the limitation caused by the traditional model can be overcome through the implementation of the Creative Town Model (CTM). The CTM helps urban historic centers and downtown cores regain their key role in regional development process by: enhancing services for citizens, promoting intrinsic industries in such regions and attracting both visitors and creative people. The CTM also aims at creating a resilient local economy through sustaining, encouraging, developing and branding the local lifestyle.

This alternative model is based on three points: design, business and scheme. Firstly, a proper design is needed to regenerate the main street of the capital, country towns and villages to create rich, suitable and enjoyable public spaces with beautiful streetscape in their historical context. Therefore, it is necessary to encourage small-scale redevelopment in areas where historic buildings no longer exist and given that the recent Japanese law amendment has opened the way for the integration of preservation and redevelopment projects. Secondly, business is crucial to industrialize the local lifestyle and cultural heritage of main streets in these spaces. Finally, scheme, mainly led by community-based developers, is needed to implement the previous two points. The proposed CTM, in this paper, will be elucidated through cases from Japanese historic towns such as Kawagoe, Ishinomaki (damaged by the Great East Japan Earthquake), and Nagahama

**Keywords:** *Creative Town Model, Historic Urban Center, Branding local lifestyle, Community based developer*

## 1. Introduction: Hollowing out the centre: an empty heart

In Japan, regional economy has been slowing down due to declining and aging population. The provincial areas and their capitals have been declining in response. The traditional Industrial Town Model (ITM), which has dominated the Japanese policy for regional (local) economic growth since 1960s, has been ineffective since many companies have failed to survive the rapid change in the economic structure. In addition, urban regeneration schemes that depend on large-scale redevelopment projects and land readjustment methods for urban renewals consume large fund and long time, two things regional urban centers can no longer afford at this transitional stage. We argue that unlike conventional models regenerating the historic town centers based on the local lifestyle with natural bounty makes the regional society and economy strong and rich. The Creative Town Model (CTM) is an alternative regional development model led by regenerating historic centers, promoting industries based on local lifestyle, and providing services to meet the new demands of the local people.

Shuttered street (ghost or dead street) has become a familiar scene in many of the regional urban centers. Two main factors contributed to this steep stagnant decline; first is the rapid urbanization in post reconstruction period associated with high automobile dependency. The skyrocketing land prizes during bubble economy led people to move to the suburb. Many of the vital functions of cities dispersed to the fringe area where land is available and much cheaper. Second factor is the aging society and de-urbanization of regional cities as Japan enters the new millennium. Japan population has started to decline in 2005. In 2060, more than 40% of the population will be over 65. Moving from rapid urbanization growth to mature societies, urban centers have to cope with new social economic changes.

| Development Models  | Industrial Town Model     | Creative Town Model                       |
|---------------------|---------------------------|---|
| Philosophy          | Efficiency                | Creativity                                |
| Targeted Industries | Basic Industries          | Segment/creative industries               |
| Economic background | Rapid growth phase        | Segment/creative phase                    |
| Social background   | Population increase       | Population decrease, aging                |
| Structure           | Hierarchical              | Network                                   |
| Function            | Distribution/ division    | Differentiation                           |
| Driving forces      | Attraction of companies   | Attraction of people and ideas            |
| Methods             | Infrastructure investment | Place branding/Local resources investment |
| Governance          | Top down/bottom up        | Self organizing                           |

*From Kidokoro 2013<sup>1</sup>*

Figure 1: Comparison between Industrial town model and Creative town model

## 2. Limitation of conventional models

### 1) The Traditional Industrial Model: The case of Ishinomaki

The traditional Industrial Town Model, which was based on the new industrial city development act in 1962, has two pillars for implementation. The first is attracting / relocating new industries to regional areas. Second pillar is improving the facilities and functions of regional capitals. The aim was to ease the pressure on metropolitan cities where large waves of migrations from rural areas and new industries continued to accumulate. In addition, it aims at minimizing the economic development gap between regional and metropolitan areas. However, the shortcomings of this model have surfaced with the new challenges facing the post bubble Japan. Ishinomaki, a historic town located 30 km from Sendai hit by the Great East Japan Earthquake in 2011, illustrate the process (Fig 2).

Blessed with a good location, Ishinomaki has been a prosperous portal city with its fishery, agricultural, paper, and steel related Industries in 1940s. And with the designation of the city as a new industrial city in 1964, more industries and factories were brought in. As for the economic growth, 1960s era was the glory days of modern Ishinomaki. As for the urban development, many historic buildings in the

center were replaced with newer modern ones. Till 1960s, the historic center, located on the western bank of Kitakami River, was effectively utilized and highly compact with almost no empty plots. Increasing population and shortage of land in the center led to unplanned urban sprawl on the fringe. The number of roadside shopping malls and retails increased as more residential blocks spread in suburb areas and on reclaimed land. Eventually, Ishinomaki city center lost its appeal for shopping and living and fell in a spiral of decline. In 2007, Ishinomaki city had 28 retails and shopping centers. Only two of them were in the center. In addition, only 11.7% of Ishinomaki's shops and small retails were located in the center, 15% of them were closed. This economic change has brought social decline as well. The population of the center decreased and aged. In 2014, 37% of the people living in the center were above 65 years old whereas the city overall rate was 28.5%<sup>2</sup>.

This unbalanced urbanization came to an end in 2011. On March 2011, a strong earthquake followed by a tsunami that exceeds 6m high destroyed large areas of the city. The historic center has its share of the tragedy but the damage was minor and the historic urban form survived. Other zones close to the shore and riverbanks were swept away along with their infrastructure. Unlike newly urbanized areas, the center is located on slightly elevated area behind a hill. This tragic incident has brought back the simple logic behind key elements in location selection of historical centers that modern Japanese urbanization has ignored.

In post earthquake reconstruction phase, it is clear that rebuilding a compact urban centre with a viable local economy is the first step for a whole sustainable recovery of the city. Neither the traditional Industrial model nor the common methods in urban renewal are the proper or sufficient solutions in this period of economic and social change. Protecting historic urban form through implementing Ishinomaki traditional design principles in a modern design language can create rich, safe, adequate built environment. Ishinomaki historic centre urban form is composed of narrow plots with mixed-use buildings and courtyards. This model can be modernized on a bigger scale where ground floors can be used for commerce and upper floors can be used for community and living spaces. Any recovery model should provide elevated evacuation spaces in case of another catastrophe.

In addition, the social capital of the city should be revived and take the lead in the recovery process. Rather than individual scattering projects done by landowners or leaseholders, a community developer-led plan, with better comprehensive tools and solutions for creating compact forms, is a better approach for sure<sup>3</sup>.

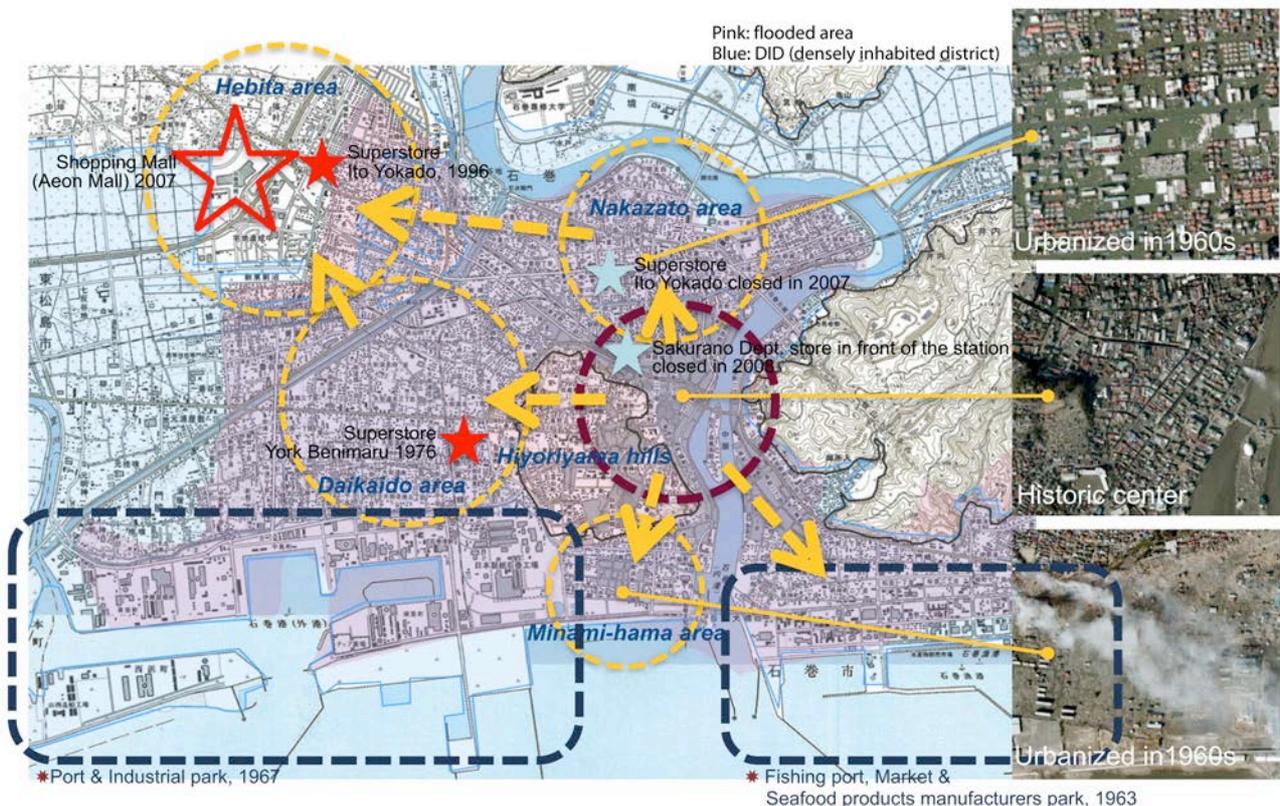


Figure 2: Change of centers in Isinomaki

They can benefit from governmental subsidies and funds for urban redevelopment projects (first type) that exceed certain area or number of landowners. Figure1 shows a table compares the Industrial Town Model with our proposed model<sup>4</sup>.

## 2) The Preservation Model for Historic Centers: Making a Buddha without putting in the soul

This proverb is used when someone undertake a work but skip the most essential part and its truly describes the on going Japanese approach for conserving historic quarters. In Japan, physical preservation and design control have been the basic way to conserve historic quarters. Historic quarters have been protected and rehabilitated as “Preservation District for Groups of Important Historic Buildings” defined in the Act on Protection of Cultural Properties and City Planning Law enacted in 1975. Hence, historical buildings are subjected to constraints on extension or rebuilding and subsidies are granted for repairing, restoration and landscaping. Although expectations for this system have been growing over the years and the number of preservation districts has increased and reconstruction of historic buildings have been carried out progressively, this system has flaws when it comes to post-restoration phase. The number of renovated shophouses that have failed to reopen is on rise. Many remaining renovated Machiya; common traditional wooden townhouses with a courtyard separating working areas from the living quarters, are used for living only. Sadly to say, in many of these historic shopping streets, national chain stores are invading empty lots and buildings with retails that meet the design codes superficially but interfere with the local business values and the Machiya Lifestyle. Kawagoe, an old castle town located 30km from Edo (Tokyo), is an exemplary case.

Kawagoe city is famous for its Kurazukuri storehouse merchant buildings and historical streetscape. Kurazukuri structures refer to clay-walled warehouse styled buildings. After the Kawagoe great fire in Meiji 26 (1904), one third of its wooden buildings were destroyed. Using Kurazukuri style for post reconstruction was the solution for a more fire resistance environment. These buildings were used as storehouses and shops as well and they were more expensive to build than common wooden structures. Unfortunately, the rapid economic growth in post war reconstruction in mid fifties and the motorization-led life style changed the way people live and shop in this city. These changes lead to the deterioration of many of these buildings. The Kurazukuri buildings were considered unsuitable for the modern needs; therefore some of

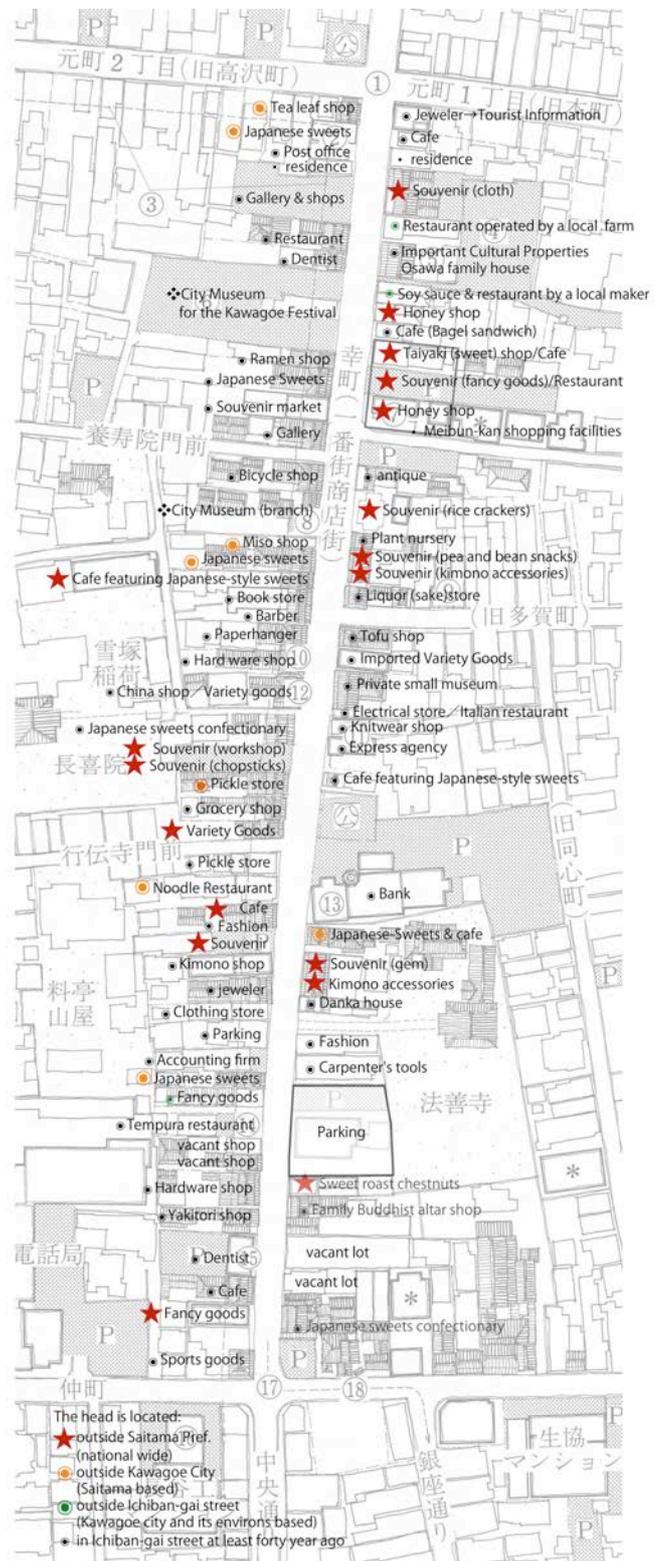


Figure 3 Shops along the Ichiban-gai Street

them were demolished. The attempts to demolish Osawa building- one of the oldest Kurazukuri Building in Kawagoe- in 1971 triggered local demonstration to save what was left. Later on, Osawa building was designated as a historical building. In 1981, 16 more buildings were listed as historical buildings as well. The efforts for preservation extended to not only to the structures but to maintain the Machiya lifestyle of Kawagoe.

In 1984, a group of inhabitants, citizens, experts, scholars, and volunteers established Kawagoe Kura organization (Kura-no-kai). A community mart model was proposed for regenerating one of the Kawagoe oldest historical streets; Ichiban-gai Commercial Street. The most recognizable work is their ‘Machizukuri Standards’, 67 guidelines and codes for preservation of the historical centre. The codes range from macro to micro level and focus on the built environment. The Machinami committee operates the codes. The committee is composed of the inhabitants including local architects and city officials, held on a monthly basis, and discusses the building proposals based on the codes. On the design side, Kawagoe has achieved a milestone. In 1998 the area was selected as one of the national preservation districts. On the local economy side, there have been limitations for the local industry to revive. Main retail chains have been occupying the renovated buildings or they built new buildings that met the design code superficially instead. The new economy adds a little to the fragile local economy and does not reflect the lifestyle related Industries of Kawagoe. We believe that this limitation is due to the weakness of the community led developing system that has been engaging in the regeneration process from the start.

### 3.The need for a new model: The Creative Town Model

Based on the current situation of historic centers explained earlier, neither physical preservation led schemes nor injecting the declining urban areas with new fragile industries is enough for success. For any sustainable development to succeed, the development model should have at least two non-negotiable pillars, inevitable smart built environment and a viable resilient economy. And for achieving the above two, an adequate scheme is also necessary. We argue that the limitations caused by the traditional models can be overcome through the implementation of the Creative Town Model (CTM). The CTM helps urban historic centers and downtown cores regain their key role in regional development process by: enhancing services for citizens, promoting intrinsic industries in such regions and attracting both visitors and creative people. The CTM also aims at creating a resilient local economy through sustaining, encouraging, developing and

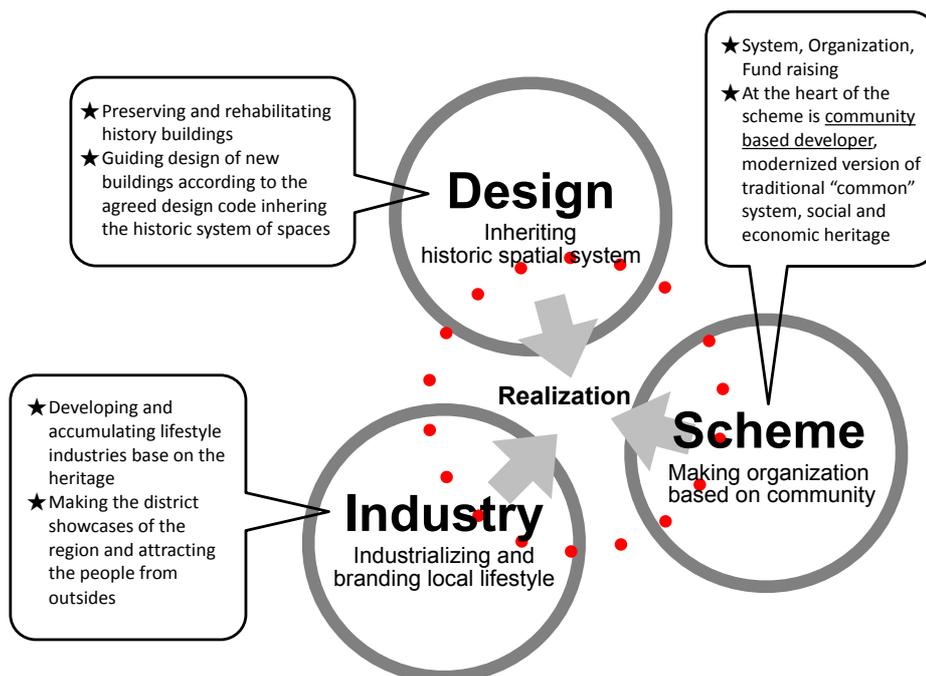


Figure 4: Three-point approach of the Creative Town Model

branding the local lifestyle. So design, business, and scheme are the key three points for implementing the proposed model and let's call it the “Three-point approach”. Figure 4 explains the three points.

Design is to create rich, suitable and enjoyable public spaces with beautiful streetscape in the historical context. Simultaneously is to make the urban area compact, to protect a fresh farmland and rich nature, and to achieve low carbon society. The first step is preserving and rehabilitating historic buildings and guiding design of new buildings according to the agreed design codes, inhering the hierarchical system of spaces within the street area (public, semi public, and private), which existed in Edo period.

Scheme means system, organization, fund raising to implement the regeneration the main street. Community-based developer should be at the heart of the scheme. The developers will realize the design and industry, rebuild or rehabilitate buildings according to the agreed design codes, help to create enjoyable public spaces and generate attractive shops, restaurants and other facilities proposing affluent lifestyle based on the original life culture of the region. We think this type of developer is just a modernized version of the traditional “common” system rooted in the social and economic Japanese heritage.

Industry means to develop and accumulate lifestyle industries based on the heritage, the beautiful natural environment, and the original life culture of the region in the town centers. The urban centers need industry that uses ideas to attract visitors such as restaurants that prepare dishes with local ingredients, shops selling new lifestyle based crafts made by local artisans and creators, or Machiya style accommodations that provide unique local experience. They need facilities to support the bringing-up of children or extend healthy life span to bring more residents. Local brand stores, and affordable housing in the redeveloped and renovated buildings can make living in the centre convenient enjoyable place. Such ideas have been already done on a small scale and have proven to be successful in attracting consumers and new members to the local society. We will discuss these three points approach through introducing the case of Nagahama.

#### 4. Case: Nagahama

The city is located to the northwest of lake Biwa, the largest lake in Japan. Its old historic centre extends 400 meter east west and 1200 meter south north. Nagahama historic centre was built according to the Machiya style. As many other Japanese provincial city centers, due to urban sprawl and dispersing city vital functions to the fringe, the commercial streets of Nagahama started to decline in 1970s with closed shops

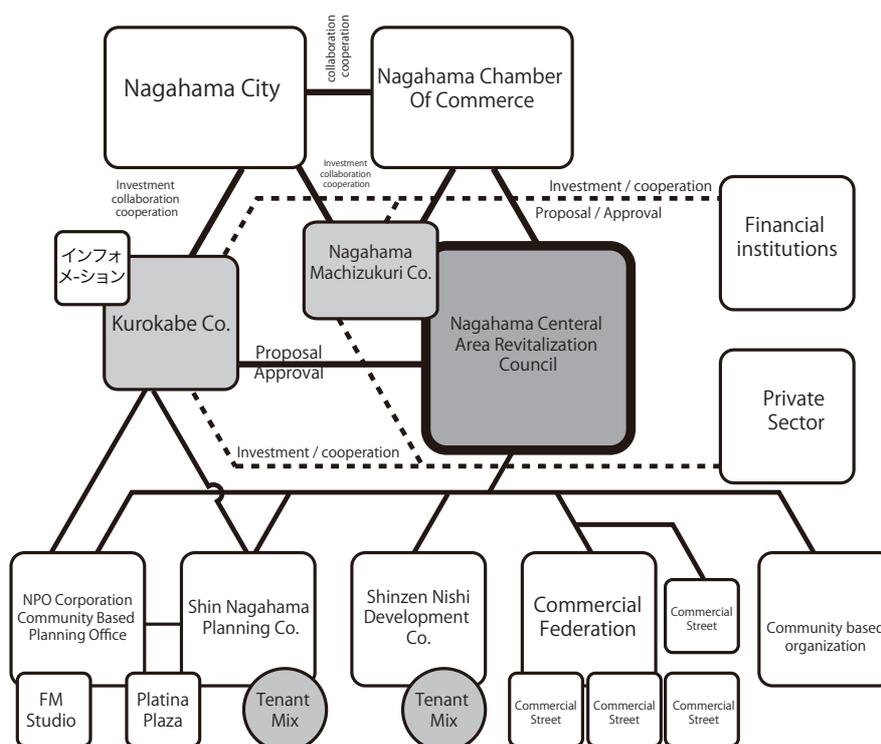


Figure 5: The scheme of Nagahama showing involved entities and their connections

exceeding 40% in some streets.

The urban regeneration has been taking place since late 1980s with a recognizable success. And now Nagahama is famous for its glass Industries. It all has started in 1987, when a historical building called Kurokabe -black wall- was at risk of demolition. The local residents urged the city municipality to buy the building and convert it to a folk museum. However, such proposal was criticized because a museum will neither bring new business nor attract visitors to Nagahama declining centre. After consultation the final decision was to establish a community-based developer company called Kurokabe -as a third sector-, which will be in charge of buying and handling the building. The needed capital money was collected from the city and local companies. The building was converted into a gallery shop specialized in western glass with opening a nearby restaurants and a pocket park. Since opening, sales of the gallery shop eight folded after nine years to reach more than 800 million yen. The number of visitors increased from 98,000 people in 1989 to 2,177,000 in 2003<sup>5</sup>. Kurokabe has been restoring abandoned shops and empty lots, many of which specialized in glass such as workshops and studio galleries. In 2016, the corporation runs more than 29 galleries in Nagahama. Also other third sector organizations have been engaging in the regeneration such as Shin Nagahama planning Company, Nagahama Machizukuri Company, and Shinzen Nishi Development Company.

Implementing design, business, and Scheme has been behind the progress. When the organizations in charge renovate/ rebuild or build a building, they respect the design rules, the historic streetscape, and the lifestyle of Nagahama. Protecting Machiya lifestyle of Nagahama has been always a priority. In addition, they have been carrying out small projects over a long period of time to keep the spirit of the place minimally affected. As for the business side; glass industry has been selected as the main business - even though it is not a local industry in Nagahama city- for four reasons: first, Nagahama needs an industry with profit exceeds the management cost of renovated buildings. Second, an industry that can help regenerating the city centre without interfering with the local exiting Industries or competing with them is better than an already existing one. Third, the industry should be a small in scale so it can fit with the Machiya life style. And last, the industry should be unique and hard to find in Japan or at least in Shiga Prefecture. The western



Figure 6: Nagahama Motohama block redevelopment/preservation project

glass met all these four points and the city has managed to brand this industry successfully. After 30 years the glass industry has been well established. But in order to progress more in the regeneration, more authentic development of local lifestyle based industry has been required. An example of such efforts is “Albergo Diffuso” style accommodation has been on progress. It offers visitors to stay in old Machiya accommodations where they can experience the life of an old town just as the local residents.

On the scheme side: The third sector in Nagahama has been in the heart of the process. Community-based developers carry out the projects in which the locals largely fund. All the entities that are engaged in the process are well connected. Figure 5 shows the chart of Nagahama scheme.

Though the practices have generated certain results, it is difficult to complete the rehabilitation of the urban fabric as a whole. There are constraints and limitations in regulations for carrying out some projects. For example the block called Motohamamachi, approximately 80m by 110m, located in the center, is a patchwork of traditional Machiya houses, ordinary shop houses, a run-down 5 stories RC building built in 1970 as shopping facility and a parking lots. This is a familiar scene in many of these urban centers. To such an area it has been difficult to apply both the urban renewal system and historic conservation system at the same time. The former aims to increase the use of land and to create an earthquake/fire-proof environment. It requires the land to be vacant before building to benefit from subsidies. So demolition the whole is a necessary step. However, the later aims to preserve historic buildings as a group.

Fortunately, in 2016, a relaxation in the urban renewal laws - the Urban Renaissance Special Measures Law and Urban Renewal Act - allowed for specific zoning guidance where preservation of old buildings has become possible. In Nagahama redevelopment/preservation project of the block is making progress using this relaxation. In the mixed-use redevelopment project one of the community-based developers, Shin Nagahama planning Company plays a developer and 6 old wooden buildings and an old bank are to be preserved.



This paper tried to propose a solution for the long struggle most historic centers of Japanese provincial capitals have been confronting with for more than 30 years. The Creative Town Model is an attempt for reviving these centers to meet the emerging demands for sustainable regional development. Today, more policy makers believe that for achieving a successful model, no attempt should ignore the original centre, the *Umbilicus* of the city<sup>6</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Creative Town Hub: An Outline of Creative Town, 2013, The table was originally prepared by Kidokoro, prof. of Tokyo Univ.

<sup>2</sup> Ishinomaki City: City Center Vitalization Plan, 2010

<sup>3</sup> Fukukawa: What to learn from historic way of building in the case of reconstruction of the damaged central Ishinomaki city by the great east Japan earthquake: The role of the integrated conservation of cultural heritage for a creative, resilient and sustainable city ACTA of the ICOMOS - CIVVIH Symposium, Naples 2012 edited by Teresa Colletta, GESTIONI & PARTECIPAZIONI srl (concessionaria esclusiva edizioni FrancoAngeli)

<sup>4</sup> So far, the three-point approach mentioned below has been carried out in two redevelopment projects in the central area of Ishinomaki; Both located on main commercial streets. The first, Chuo 1-3 project, is a series of six floor buildings with 8 shops and parking in the ground floor and 77 residential units with small courtyard on upper floors. The lowest residential spaces are 6 meter high for a safe evacuation. The second is Tachimachi 2-5 project. Ground floors are for retails, services, health care, and parking. Upper floors are for living with common space for evacuation. The project has a large courtyard with renovated old building. Community developers, satisfying redevelopment project requirements-type one, have carried out both projects. Now the third project is in progress.

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.kurokabe.co.jp/company/>

<sup>6</sup> Japan Economic Growth Forum (Chair: Prof. OTA Hiroko): Urgent Proposals for Regional Revitalization: Making the Umbilicus of the City, [http://www.economic-growth-forum.jp/#anc\\_150511](http://www.economic-growth-forum.jp/#anc_150511)

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