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Elderly Housing in Contemporary Japan: Exploring Alternative Forms of Housing

Abstract

Shelter is one of the existential needs. How housing is organized and designed, however, is closely tied to the circumstances in a society, its culture and history. The recent demographic development in Japan, the growing number of elderly people and changing family structures and functions, the diversification of lifestyles and increasing differences in income, will likely lead to more diversity in housing and living arrangements. Apart from numerous innovations in national welfare and housing policies, privately organized alternative forms of housing have emerged. Although their number is limited, some have achieved some popularity through media attention and serve as models not only for similar projects, but also for public and commercial housing projects, which gives them a greater importance than the number of alternative projects might suggest. As the alternative housing projects are strongly influenced by their initiators and do not follow any regulations concerning their size or their organizational structure, they are extremely diverse, meeting ideals, preferences and needs of different groups of people.

The purpose of this paper is to trace back the development of alternative housing forms in Japan and to categorize different types with

regard to their concepts and target groups. On the basis of three examples, which have been examined more closely, I try to answer the question whether these forms of housing could be considered a future option for a broader segment of the population of Japan's ageing society.

Introduction

In 2007, about one fifth of Japan's population that consists of 27 million people living in 16 million households was 65 years and older.¹ The ever growing number of elderly people as reflected through the increasing imbalance in the outlay of the population pyramid – along with a transformation of family structures and lifestyles – had significant consequences for Japanese households and the housing arrangements of elderly people. An increasing number of them, mostly couples, but also a growing number of singles, live in “all 65 and older” households.²

This development led to serious problems, for example, an increase of the average age in rural areas and certain urban neighbourhoods, with an elderly person's death sometimes remaining undetected for a long time (*kodokushi*) and high suicide rates among the aged.³ To cope with the growing number of elderly people, especially with those in need of care or support, several welfare policy measures have been

¹ Cf. Kokuritsu Shakai Hoshō Jinkō Mondai Kenkyūjo (2006): *Nihon no shōrai suikei jinkō. Population projections for Japan*.

² Cf. Kōsei Rōdōshō (2006): *Kokumin seikatsu kiso chōsa* [Comprehensive survey of living conditions of the people on health and welfare], and Sōmushō Tōkeikyoku (2006): *Heisei 15 jūtaku tochi tōkei chōsa hōkoku* [Housing and land census 2003].

³ Cf. Nakazawa, Takumi et al. (2008): *Danchi to kodokushi* [“Lonely death” in housing complexes], 90, and Popp, Julius and Johannes H. Wilhelm (2009): *Altern und Suizidalität im heutigen Japan* [Ageing and suicidal tendency in present Japan], 73–93.

introduced over the last few years ranging from the compulsory public long-term care insurance to assisted living facilities.⁴ At the same time, private individuals and NPOs (non-profit-organisation) have taken action to create their own housing forms, which I will refer to as “alternative forms of housing for the elderly”.

Gerontologist Carol Schreter wrote that shared housing in the United States, which can be categorized as a specific alternative form of housing, is a way of citizen’s self-help.⁵ It can be assumed that the development of new forms of housing is a reaction to an insufficient choice of housing in Japan, too: The housing market is partly trying to adapt to the new situation, but mostly in the upper price segments and still fails to provide adequate diversity. Older citizens are not welcome in the regular rental market, house owners often reject elderly people out of fear that they could cause a fire, not pay their rent or die unnoticed.⁶ The public housing units, which have been attainable to single elderly people, too, since 1980,⁷ or other policies to improve the barrier-free infrastructure of neighbourhoods and houses do not meet the

⁴ Cf. Campbell, John C. (2003): How policies differ. Long-term care insurance in Japan and Germany, and Imai, Kazuo (2010): *Shinia kyojū no keifu to sono mirai* [The development of senior housing and its future], 59–80.

⁵ Cf. Schreter, Carol (1986): Advantages and disadvantages of shared housing, 136.

⁶ That is why the government decided on a policy of implementing a registration system for private rental housing, whose owners agreed not to reject elderly persons. Refer to the website of the Foundation for Senior Citizens Housing (Koseisha jūtaku kaidan) at <http://www.sumai-info.jp/header/21/index.html> (accessed 16 January 2009) for the current registration state of “recommended private rental houses” (yūryō minkan chintai jūtaku).

⁷ Some measures were taken in the public housing field already as early as in the middle of the 1960s (Ōumi, Kazuo (2002): *Kōkyō jūtaku no saisei to atarashii yakuwari* [The revitalization of public housing and its new role], 167).

current preferences and needs sufficiently.⁸ Alternative housing is not only a surrogate for political deficits however. It is also an expression of broader social changes and new lifestyles, which deserve further attention.

The questions I want to answer in this paper are: Why have alternative forms of housing emerged in Japan? What are the motives of persons who have chosen to live in alternative housing? And can alternative forms of housing be an option for a larger number of elderly people in the population? I will approach these questions based on the results of my fieldwork conducted in Tokyo between 2006 and 2008.

This paper begins with my definition of alternative housing for elderly people. Then some information will be given about the development of different forms of alternative housing. Three examples will be presented followed by a characterization of three types of alternative housing. Next, I will try to shed some light on what people expect from the types of alternative housing depicted. Consequently we may gain some insight into what kind of persons may be potentially interested in alternative housing. I conclude with remarks on the chances for these forms of housing to become more popular.

What is alternative housing for the elderly?

Definition of alternative housing for elderly people

The definition of alternative forms of housing for elderly persons used here consists of four elements. Alternative forms of housing for elderly people are (1) “alternatives to institutionalization, that is nursing

⁸ Cf. Kamemoto, Kazuhiko (2004): *Kōreisha to kyojū mondai* [Elderly people and the housing problem], and Mine, Manabu (2008): *Kōreisha no sumai to kea – Zen-shakai-teki fukushi no naka no kaigo fukushi to kyojū fukushi* [Care and housing welfare within the social welfare system], 46, 71–73.

homes” and, (2) “exceptions to the more common traditional housing arrangements”,⁹ (3) forms of housing that are based on certain common concepts and social interaction (in contrast to people who live in the same place coincidentally) and (4) housing forms especially designed for elderly people or multigenerational housing aiming at elderly people.

Whereas the first and second criteria refer to a more general differentiation of the forms of housing (not institutional, not conventional family housing), the third one focuses on how life is organized. The first three aspects of this definition correspond to the definition used by the German non-profit organization Forum Gemeinschaftliches Wohnen e.V.¹⁰, an umbrella organization for organizations and individuals that are involved or want to promote multi-generational and collaborative housing projects enabling a “self determined and independent life on a communal basis”. The fourth aspect is self-explanatory in the context of housing of elderly people.

Terminology used for alternative housing in Japan

How is alternative housing referred to in the Japanese language? Commonly used expressions are *kyōsei jūtaku*, *kyōsei-gata sumai*, *sanka-gata jūtaku*, *kyōdō kyojū* and *komyuniti-gata jūtaku*.¹¹ These

⁹ That is households consisting predominantly of nuclear families or other close relatives, e.g. three-generation households (Eckert, J. Kevin and M.I. Murrey (1984): *Alternative modes of living for the elderly*, 96).

¹⁰ Cf. Forum Gemeinschaftliches Wohnen e.V. official website: <http://www.fgw-ev.de> (accessed 23 April 2009).

¹¹ Cf. Harada, Yoko (1998): *Korekutibu haujingu. Nihon ni okeru kyōdō kyojū no kanōsei ni tsuite* [Collective housing. About the possibilities of collective housing in Japan], 165–166; Honma, Hirobumi (2006): *Kōporatibu hōshiki de no sumai-zukuri* [Building homes according to the cooperative housing system], 37; Koyabe, Ikuko (2006): *Korekutibu haujingu* [Collective housing], 84–100 and Okamoto, Kenjiro (2008): *Kōreisha no kyōsei jūtaku, sono genjitsu to kadai* [Communal houses for the

terms are not used systematically for specific ways of housing. The same holds true for more specific names for alternative housing forms like *kōporatibu haujingu* (cooperative housing), *gurūpu ribingu* (group living) and *korekutibu haujingu*¹² (collective housing). At least in the academic field some efforts can be observed to establish definitions and to use them more consistently.¹³

Development of alternative forms of living in Japan

A small number of alternative forms of housing for elderly people first emerged as a welfare measure in snowy and remote regions of Japan in the 1970s, where an unfavourable demographic development led to uncommon measures by the local authorities. The next important impulse was the Kōbe Earthquake in 1995, after which alternative housing became a means to accommodate elderly people in differently organized social housing schemes in Kōbe and in the prefecture of Hyōgo after they lost their houses. Research on elderly people in provisional housing revealed that houses with larger common space in

elderly, current state and problems], 271–291. See also Jūtaku Netto Sōdan Shitsu official website: <http://www.so-dan.net> (accessed 23 April 2009).

¹² There is some confusion about the word “collective housing” in Japan. It is used for the public housing schemes established especially for elderly people as it can be found in Kōbe which are also referred to as *koreisha-muke kōei korekutibu* or *shinsai fukkō kōei korekutibu* (collectives for the elderly in social housing schemes or social housing collectives as earthquake rebuilding) on the one hand, and for (usually) multi-generational, self-organized housing described below on the other hand (Koyabe, Ikuko (2004): *Korekutibu haujingu de kurasō. Seijuku shakai no raifusutairu to sumai no sentaku* [Let’s live in a collective house. Lifestyle and housing choice in a mature society], iii).

¹³ Cf. Mine (2008), 44–45; Ōe, Moriyuki (2005): *Kōreisha gurūpu ribingu no kanōsei to kadai* [Chances and problems of “group living”], 7–10; Koyabe, Ikuko (2004): *Korekutibu haujingu de kurasō. Seijuku shakai no raifusutairu to sumai no sentaku* [Let’s live in a collective house. Lifestyle and housing choice in a mature society], iii–iv, and Koyabe, Ikuko (2008): *Dai san no jūtaku no taipu. Tēma: Korekutibu haujing* [The third housing type: collective housing], 582.

central parts of the building led to more interaction of the residents and eventually to better health conditions compared to houses without considerable common space.¹⁴ As they were not self-organized by the residents or in cooperation with the residents, it could be argued that it is inappropriate to call them “alternative”.¹⁵ Within the context of new forms of housing Japanese researchers categorize these forms of housing mentioned above as pioneer types.¹⁶

The housing concept for the social housing follows the model of Scandinavian communal forms of elderly housing, which were widely discussed in Japan in the 1990s.¹⁷ A significantly increasing number of alternative forms of living offering a choice to elderly people can be detected after the NPO law came into effect in 1998. Of similar importance was the public long-term care insurance system introduced in 2000.¹⁸ Many alternative forms of housing are therefore organized with the help of or by NPOs and, in the case of care being eventually needed, with care provided at home within the system of the long-term care insurance.

¹⁴ Cf. Ishitō, Naoko and Korekutibu Ōendan (2000): *Korekutibu haujingu tadaima funtōchū* [Efforts now: collective housing], 18–23; Koyabe (2006), 92–93, and Satō, Yumi (1998): *Kōreisha setai nado no aratana kyōdō seikatsu no keisei – korekutibu haujingu ni tsuite* [New forms of communal living for elderly households – collective housing], 113.

¹⁵ Apart from the housing schemes mentioned very few examples of privately or even commercially organized forms of alternative housing have been established since the middle of the 1980s. They were usually built to meet specific needs (Sasaki, Shinko (2004): *Kōreiki gurūpu ribingu no kōteki kōkyū ni kansuru kenkyū*. [Study on the public supply of group living projects for the elderly], 7).

¹⁶ Cf. Sasaki, Shinko (2004): *Kōreiki gurūpu ribingu no kōteki kōkyū ni kansuru kenkyū*. [Study on the public supply of group living projects for the elderly].

¹⁷ Cf. Sasaki (2004), 13–14. For an overview see e.g. Koyabe, Ikuko (1997): *Korekutibu haujingu no susume* [Encouragement for collective housing].

¹⁸ Cf. Sasaki (2004), 7–12.

Three case studies

To get an idea of what alternative forms of housing can look like three different types are presented in the following sections. It should be taken into account, however, that there is no common form for alternative housing. Although some common features can surely be found, they are organized with regards to the ideas of the organizers and needs of the residents.

Example A: CoCo Shōnandai

Probably the most well-known and well-documented example of an alternative form of housing exclusively for elderly people is the CoCo Shōnandai in Fujisawa. It was founded in 1999 by Saijō Setsuko (aged 80), who is one of the residents herself.¹⁹ At the time the planning process began, the NPO law and the long-term care insurance were not yet introduced and Saijō, who was politically active on the municipal level, designed a concept of housing allowing her to grow old together with others in familiar surroundings. The result was a house of barrier free design for 10 persons aged 65 or older. Each of the residents has a 25 square meters room of themselves, complete with kitchen and sanitary facilities. A large room on each of the two floors serve as common space.²⁰ The motto of CoCo Shōnandai is *jiritsu to kyōsei* (independence and living together or “symbiosis”)²¹; Saijō her-

¹⁹ The information that is given in this section is – if not otherwise stated – based on a visit to CoCo Shōnandai on 18 April 2008, where I had the opportunity to talk with two representatives of the NPO, and, though briefly, with Saijō Setsuko.

²⁰ Currently the common space on the basement floor is mainly used as an office by the NPO.

²¹ Cf. Saijō, Setsuko (2000): *10 nin 10 shoku no niji machi. Kōreisha gurūpu ribingu “CoCo shōnandai”* [The rainbow march of 10 very different people. Group living for elderly people “CoCo Shōnandai”], 15, and Saijō, Setsuko (2007): *Suminareta machi de ie de owaritai. Zaitaku tāminaru kea no aru kurashi. Zoku Kōreisha gurūpu ribingu*

self, for example, is still busy giving speeches and writing books. Many people living at CoCo Shōnandai are active (the average age being a little over 80), while others are in need of care. Rules concerning their daily life are made by the residents themselves. They describe their group as a family (*kazoku*) with conflicts occurring but also being solved on their own. CoCo Shōnandai is supported by an NPO (CoCo Shōnan, with Saijō-san being the chairwomen of the NPO), which organizes help when needed and which tries to promote integration into the neighbourhood. The latter being one of the important aims as Saijō states in her writing.²² Apart from the core task of supporting the residents²³ the NPO is also involved in giving advice to elderly people in the neighbourhood and a project has been started to search for similar forms of housing in Japan and to provide information if new projects are to be launched.²⁴

Talking to the organizers, CoCo Shōnandai gave the impression of balancing the private and communal life well. The residents pursue their own lives and help each other when needed. CoCo Shōnandai, therefore, differs from a regular household as well as from a home for the elderly. What reminded me of conventional old people's homes, however, were two features: The dinner is prepared by another NPO, lunch can be ordered from a mobile service, and only breakfast is to be prepared by the individual residents. Consequently, the residents simply have to sit down to eat, which is an arrangement that has often

“CoCo Shōnandai” [The wish to end in the town and house one is used to live in. Terminal care at home and its living conditions. Group living for elderly people “CoCo Shōnandai”], 12–14.

²² Cf. Saijō (2007), 13.

²³ Additionally to CoCo Shōnandai, the NPO organized and is supporting two more group houses, which opened their doors in 2003 and 2006 respectively.

²⁴ Cf. Saijō (2007), 216–222.

been criticised by gerontologists, if residents are still capable of performing the task themselves. Concerning this matter, Saijō gave me a rather convincing answer, saying that most of the residents, the majority of them female, had prepared meals for themselves and their families all their lives before coming to CoCo Shōnandai and were now relieved of this burden and therefore able to use their time in a more meaningful way. Organizers of exclusive retirement homes with hotel-like dinner services can argue similar. The other feature that makes CoCo Shōnandai resemble institutional housing is the architectural design. Although the building seen from the outside, particularly the arrangement of the entrance and the common rooms, resemble a one family house, the long corridors on each floor with their individual rooms adjoining each other are typical for institutions. Although the floor materials and wall decoration made or chosen by some of the residents moderate this impression.²⁵ The two further houses the NPO has built are roughly of the same size. One of them has the common rooms located in the centre of the house, which makes it more home-like. Asked, which design was more suitable for the lives of the residents, the NPO staff answered that the common room in the centre made it impossible to leave one's own room unwatched by the other residents and by potential visitors, a fact that seems to interfere with some residents' wishes for privacy.

In contrast to many private old people's homes, which require that people move to nursing homes or hospitals in the case they need nursing care, CoCo Shōnandai aims at providing a living environment for its residents that enables them to stay in the house until the end of their lives. Currently, some residents receive help from the benefits of

²⁵ Cf. Robinson, Julia W. (2006): *Institution and home. Architecture as a cultural medium*, 114, 120.

the long-term care insurance. Saijō and her fellow residents as well as care staff that are involved describe the case of a resident who eventually died of cancer, and what it had meant to her fellow residents, in great detail.²⁶ According to Saijō, terminal care in the group house and caring for one's fellow residents is one of the ideals that should be lived even though it cannot always be accomplished.

Example B: Collective House Kankan Mori

The so-called Collective House Kankan Mori²⁷ in Nippori was planned and organized by an NPO and followed the model of the Swedish concept of collective housing,²⁸ which is based on “togetherness” and “rational life”²⁹. In 2003 people were able to move in. It has as much as 28 rental flats between the size of 25 to 60 square meters, one very large dining-kitchen of over 120 square metres and various other common rooms (working space, laundry room etc.). At present about 30 persons are living in the house. It is multigenerational with the residents aged between 0 and 82 years. The group of residents include a few families, mostly with small children, a single mother with her teen-aged daughter, an elderly couple in their eighties and a number of singles of various age, most of them in their thirties and early forties. The NPO was involved in the planning process and is still involved in choosing new residents, but daily life is organized by

²⁶ Cf. Saijō (2007), 19–54, and Saijō, Setsuko (2004): *Chi'iki ni ikite suminareta ie de owaritai. Zaitaku taminaru kea no kiroku* [The wish to live in the neighbourhood and to die in the familiar home. A record of terminal care at home].

²⁷ If not stated otherwise, the following account of the collective house is based on observations made upon visits by the author and on statements made during interviews with NPO staff.

²⁸ Cf. Koyabe (2004), ii–iii.

²⁹ Cf. Vestbro, Dick U. (1992): From central *kitchen* to community cooperation. Development of collective housing in Sweden, 30–38.

an elected residents' committee. Three times a week a common dinner is arranged. There is no obligation to take part and meal times can be chosen individually. The preparation of meals, however, is one of the residents' duties with them taking turns. According to my observation, the common room was used by the residents as pleased: people sat in groups as well as alone (reading or working). A mother went away saying, "I'll be back in an hour. Could you just keep an eye on my son?" (who was about 5 years old).

As the building was not originally designed to serve the purpose of an alternative form of housing, the architectural aspects will not be discussed in this paper. The interior design of the common dining-kitchen, however, helps creating a comfortable atmosphere in spite of the hall-like size of the room.³⁰

At present, the elderly couple living in the collective house is still able to live independently. If care is eventually needed, a mobile care service can be made use of as would be the case in conventional housing arrangements. Since there are few elderly persons common duties could if necessary be taken over by younger residents, which should not pose a problem with about 30 persons sharing the tasks. However, should there be more elderly persons at some point in the future new concepts would have to be worked out. In comparison to CoCo Shōnandai, Kankan Mori is not explicitly oriented to the lives and needs of elderly people, especially those requiring help. But this may just make Kankan Mori more attractive to younger residents in particular, but also to middle-aged and younger elderly people. Although the fluctuation of residents is high (it is a rental form of housing after all)

³⁰ In May 2009, a new, but slightly smaller house by the same NPO is planned to be opened in the western part of Tokyo. Wishes and preferences of the residents, who are involved in the planning process, have likely been taken into consideration.

and most of the new residents are of a younger age, it might become necessary to think about concepts of how to cope with elderly persons in need of help and care, if this form of housing aims to be an option for elderly people.

Example C: Ryūgasaki Shinia Mura

The third example is Ryūgasaki Shinia Mura³¹ (Ryūgasaki Senior Village), which was completed in 2007 and is a project organized by a building cooperative. That means the house was planned by a group of people who intended to live in it themselves. In contrast to housing cooperatives in other countries residents in Japan usually own their flats within the cooperative houses.³² In Ryūgasaki Shinia Mura it was basically one couple that took a leading position throughout the planning process. The other residents joined in later or after the completion of the house. The house is located in a rural region in Ibaraki Prefecture, roughly one and a half hours by train from Tokyo. It has 29 flats for single persons and couples (between 50 and 70 square metres each). It has a strong resemblance to an ordinary apartment house, but is built barrier-free and oriented to the needs elderly people may have: A restaurant (also open to the public), which relieves the residents of the tasks of preparing their own meals and functions as a place of communal gathering, too. A day care centre for elderly people and a

³¹ Information for this section was obtained at a presentation by the founder of Ryūgasaki Shinia Mura, Imami Toshitaka at the NPO Toshi Jūtaku to Machizukuri Kenkyūkai on 5 April 2007. See also Katō, Hitoshi (2008): *Teinen-go no 8man jikan ni idomu* [80,000 hours – a challenge after retirement], 96–101. Images of the cooperative house could be seen online at <http://shinia-mura.com/pc/> (accessed 15 November 2008), but the homepage has since been changed and gives information on the new project, Ryūgasaki Shinia Mura II, now (accessed 20 May 2009).

³² Cf. Honma (2006), 36–39, and Kobayashi, Hideki (2006): *Sekai no kōpu jūtaku* [Housing cooperatives in the world], 22–24.

clinic on the ground floor of the building contribute to the integration into the neighbourhood.

Unlike in the collective house Kankan Mori collaboration of the residents is not explicitly part of the concept, which also shows in the floor plan. Common space for the residents (except for the long hallways) is identical to those places also opened to the public. Shared experience during the planning process of the house, however, seems to have led to a relatively close interaction among the residents. Emphasising “security, peace of mind and comfort” (*anzen, anshin, kaiteki*) in its web representation the Ryūgasaki Shinia Mura is similar to advertisings of profit-orientated old people’s homes.

Why do people opt for alternative forms of housing and living?

The examples discussed here are certainly deeply influenced by their organisers and residents and therefore highly individual, as show the significant differences in their philosophies. Nevertheless, they were chosen to represent three different types of alternative housing available to Japan’s elderly people. Their organization and architecture, the allocation of private and common space, vary widely but adjust to the diverse needs and preferences of the residents. All of three types require various degrees of commitment to the housing project, often even years before the house is built. Some of them demand the cooperation of the residents in their daily life. Sometimes there is a strong focus on the idea of communal life; other times it is regarded as optional. After summing up the most important characteristics of the three types, potential motives for choosing these kinds of housing are presented.

Figure 1: Housing type “group living” of communal living.

Source: Partly adopted from Ōhashi (2002): *Kakudai suru kazoku* [The enlarging family], 107, 120.

Example A is a housing type called *gurūpu ribingu* or *gurūpu hausu* (group living, group house) in Japan. It was established with the explicit intention to provide a housing option for elderly persons and is hence only for elderly persons. The usual number of residents is three to fifteen persons. The residents are usually still able to take care of themselves when moving in. Nevertheless, this housing type has certain features and potential services with regard to the ageing of its residents. In many cases the houses are strongly assisted by NPOs, but individual persons can be the main organizers, too.³³ A network of volunteers and professionals particularly organized to help with these needs can often be found offering support and assistance. In contrast to residential homes for the elderly, group houses are organized to give support and care only if individual needs arise and not as a general prerequisite. Some projects see terminal care as one of their tasks, but are usually not prepared (concerning trained staff and architectural features) to handle for example severe cases of dementia. The resi-

³³ Cf. Kondō, Takayo and Moriyuki Ōe (2002): *Kōreisha gurūpu ribingu ni kansuru kiso-teki kenkyū* [A study on the group-living for the Aged], 345–346, and Ōe (2005), 31–42.

dents mostly organize their lives themselves, but sometimes they become recipients of care very similar to traditional residential care facilities. Group houses aim at combining privacy and communal elements, therefore focusing on mutual help and communal activities. Most of the residents live in single rooms, though there are couples among the residents of this kind of housing as well, who have to rent two separate rooms because rooms for two persons or more are not provided in most of the “group houses” (Figure 1). One particular problem with this kind of housing is that people are roughly of the same age when moving in and it is likely that a lot of them will require a higher level of care at almost the same time.

Figure 2: Housing type “collective living” of communal living.
Source: Partly adopted from Ōhashi (2002), 107, 120.

Example B is a so-called “collective house” following the Scandinavian example.³⁴ This type does not centre on a certain age group. It focuses on a concept of living that tries to balance the need for indi-

³⁴ Cf. Vestbro (1992), 30–38.

vidual independence with comparatively strong social involvement. It often aims at creating a “neighbourly togetherness”. A willingness to contribute to the daily requirements of the group (e.g. preparing meals) is expected. Unlike “intentional communities” that follow a certain ideology (an ecological form of living or political and religious orientation, for example) is not an underlying principle. To secure continuity for this rental type of housing, a relatively large number of residents ranging between twenty to forty residents are preferred. As shown in figure 2 is the basic unit an individual person although they may live together as ordinary families within the house.

Example C is a “cooperative house”³⁵. It is usually planned by the residents themselves. It is based less on individuals but rather on traditional forms of households as basic units not unlike conventional multi-family houses. Shared rooms and facilities often exist, but are not a prerequisite. In contrast to the first two forms of housing the residential property is owner-occupied. It combines ordinary private homes, planned by the residents, with active social interaction among the neighbours. The number of households involved differs widely; most of them are composed of ten to twenty households. They are mostly family-orientated, but some include elderly people or consist of elderly-person-households only (Figure 3).

What are the features that attract elderly people? Which preferences and needs do these alternative forms satisfy that more traditional ways of housing and living arrangements do not? The examples of alternative housing projects mentioned above suggest the following:

³⁵ Information on cooperative houses in general and on a number of projects can be obtained on the website of the NPO Coop Jūtaku Suishin Kyōgikai: <http://www.coop.kyo.gr.jp/index.html> (accessed 15 November 2008).

Figure 3: Housing type “cooperative housing” of communal living.
Source: Partly adopted from Ōhashi (2002), 107, 120.

- lack of public solutions in the field of elderly housing apart from institutional elderly care (insufficient choice) → group house
- growing reluctance to use institutional care (change of elderly perception, generational change) → group house
- new demands caused by changes in family structures and family roles (surrogate family, *ketsuen no nai kazoku* [family without blood relation]) → group house, collective house
- new demands caused by an increasing diversification of approaches to life (new lifestyles, insufficiency of choice) → group house, collective house, cooperative house
- insufficiency of affordable commercial housing supply (economic reasons) → group house, collective house
- mutual support and neighbourly help available while keeping independence, autonomy and privacy (*jiritsu to kyōsei* [independence and living together or “symbiosis”]) → group house, collective house (cooperative house)
- active interaction among neighbours, generations (*nagaya no tsu-*

*kiai*³⁶) → group house, collective house, cooperative house

- sense of security and safety (*anshin*, *anzen*) → group houses (collective house, cooperative house)
- integration into the community (*chiiki o ikiru*, *komyunity zukuri*) → group houses, collective house (cooperative house)

Conclusion: Is alternative housing a solution?

Alternative housing can satisfy a number of needs, but some characteristics of this form of housing may also pose problems. The residents of alternative housing are usually self-determined and very flexible in the way they lead their lives. They do not depend on care institutions or their families. However, they have to be very proactive. Living closely together with others certainly does prevent isolation, but social skills and conformity with basic agreements is necessary. Decision making on aspects concerning their fellow residents or the house as a whole can be very time-consuming. Whether an elderly person will choose an alternative form of housing may depend on his or her – objective and subjective – health condition as well as on lifestyle decisions and, at least for some projects, on financial means.

Compared to Northern Europe, the Netherlands and also Germany, collaborative housing in Japan is still in an experimental stage. Nevertheless, it is on the rise. Given future demographic developments, dissatisfaction with existing forms of services for the elderly and feelings of insecurity especially felt by people living in single-person households as well as the expectation to live a life according to one's

³⁶ *Nagaya* are urban tenement houses associated with neighbourly cooperation of the past, especially those of the prewar area. For the concept of *nagaya* in relation to communal living see e.g. Hayakawa, Yūko and GL Netto (2000): *Rōgo wa nakama to kurashitai. Gurūpu ribingu no susume* [To live with one's friends in old age. A recommendation of group living], 10–13.

own preferences might lead to an increase in alternative forms of housing. Alternative forms of housing could become one of those “micro trends” that, according to Mark J. Penn, are “small forces” “behind tomorrow’s big changes”³⁷ and therefore deserve further examination.

³⁷ Cf. Penn, Mark J. (2007) *Microtrends. The small forces behind tomorrow’s big changes*.

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