

## Reuse of Farmhouse with its Owner Living in the City

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### Introduction

The population decrease caused by the decline of agriculture results a marked increase in number of vacant house in rural area in Japan. In the meantime, the baby boomers in Japan reach to the age of retirement around 2007. It is highly expected that a large population move to a rural area from cities, especially in next several years. With an opportunity to increase the rural area population, both national and local governments offer programs to promote a new lifestyle in a rural area for them. They encourage people in the city to move to a rural area. To provide them housing and accommodation, many governments have the vacant farmhouse reuse programs that include information supply, mediation, and repair subsidies.

In their programs, however, the houses are regarded as an object for a trade, not a subject attached by its owner. Therefore many of owners of farmhouse reluctant to lend their houses, even though no one lives there at present. They don't feel free to outsiders taking over their property, mostly because they are attached their houses so much that they don't like to loose their control over them.

If house owners get involved in the vacant farmhouse reuse programs, it will be easier to reuse of them. Some owners of the vacant house live in the city. If they are concerned with those programs, they could work well as an intermediary between the city and the county.

To realize the farmhouse reuse connecting people who are remote each other, we will examine, in this paper, its situations, possibilities, implications, requirements and obstructions by analyzing the government programs and the cases in point.

## 1. "The country living" in the government programs

### **One Million People Homing and Circulating Campaign**

The governments have raised concerns about the population decreases in a rural area since 1980' and have been promoting the city people to return to/settle down there with a moderate success. Getting a large number of retiring baby boomers that includes potential inhabitants in the country, they try to further the policy. On account, to develop a nation wide action called "One Million People Homing and Circulating Campaign", they organized the One Million Homing and Circulating Campaign Support Center in 2002. It is a national level organization with alliance among a labor union, a farmers' cooperative, a consumer association, an economic organization and volunteers.

To advocate and provide information directly to the people living in the metropolitan area, they do a big event called "Homing" every year in Tokyo together with public agencies, NPOs and a newspaper company. This event combines advocacy with a festival including a keynote speech, panel discussions, farmers markets and the folk dance and music performances. In one corner of the site, there are consulting booths where city people can get information and discuss about the possibility of a country life with the local government personnel. Over 5000 residents come to the events every year.

At local level, prefectures also organize NPO to administrate the Homing Support Center which is expected to conducts gathering and providing information, doing research, proposing projects, giving guidance on a county life and advocacy, linking with the One Million People Homing and Circulating Campaign Support Center.

"Circulating" in this campaign shows a new strategy of this policy: the promotion of a lifestyle in which people spend a certain time at a certain place in the country while they keep their dwellings in the city. Under this strategy, both national and local governments take various actions.

### **Double Dwelling**

In March 2005, the Ministry of Land, Infrastructure and Transport released a report "Significance of Double Dwelling and a Framework of its Strategic Support Plan". In this report, double dwelling means a lifestyle that people

have a specific place in the country to visit regularly or to stay over one month in all year around, keeping their domicile in the city. Its strategic support plan consists of four major programs. 1. Social system building to meet city people's various lifestyle: a new working system such as long term holidays, biweekly four day week, telecommuting, a new donation system for rural area development, double dweller's utility share plan, reverse mortgage for double dwelling, etc. 2. Coordinating the requirements between the city and the country: information supply, vacant house reuse, etc. 3. Regional plan making based on double dwelling. 4. IT exploiting such as remote medical care and community business building. According to this report, a large part of social system will be reorganized to adjust duplicate dwelling that allow people in the city to pursue various lifestyles both in the city and in the country.

This policy is adopted against a situation to be solved at present both in rural areas and in cities. In rural areas, they are apprehensive that a big decline in inhabitant population and rapid aging cause an expansion of non-dwelling area especially in the villages and towns out of the local core city. In cities, the city people's demand for the country habitation is emerging. It is considered that with double dwelling it is possible for city people to have a life with more leisure oriented and spacious housing. For rural areas, it is expected to develop local economy with their expenditure on necessities and housing as well as to maintain local communities.

If a large number of people in the city take double dwelling as their lifestyle, it is likely that local economy become active in certain degree. However, this report does not refer to anything about its effect on agriculture and forestry, which are in the serious conditions at present. Therefore it is hard to say that double dwelling contributes to a local community improvement as a whole.

### **Dwelling for Communication**

The Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications also promotes Dwelling for Communication, a lifestyle that city people move between their place and another place in the country whose main purpose is making communication. It urges to people in the city to communicate with local people.

Three projects are operating under this policy: gathering and providing information by a portal-site, doing an event to advocate/promote double dwelling, and developing the promotion programs using model sites.

They categorize double dwelling into five types: short stay, long stay, almost settled, coming and going, and taking part, and develop their projects based on these types. Each of them is different with its purpose and a period of stay as follows:

Short stay: The purpose is to experience the rural life as well as to socialize in local community. It is supposed to visit several times in a year or every year with a 1-3 over night stay in each time.

Long stay: The purpose is to enjoy a leisurely rural life apart from a noisy and stressful urban setting. The length of stay is supposed from 1-2 weeks to 3months, and a few times in a year,

Almost settled: In this type people live and work mainly in a rural area while they keep their house in a city and stay there occasionally to enjoy city life. The length of stay in a rural area is longer than one in a city.

Coming and going: The purpose is to spend much of leisure time in the country. They have a regular place to visit in the country every weekend or once a month. The length of a stay is supposed to be 2-3day.

Taking part: The purpose is to learn the operations and techniques of the country life, to participate in activities of nature preservation, or to help farm work. The length of a stay is from one week to several months.

One of their major projects is to maintain a portal site called Recommending Dwelling for Communication: a guide to the country life nation-wide. It have provided city people with useful information on the country life since 2006: basic information on local sites and life, double dwelling information such as country life experience programs and accommodations including vacant house information, and country life know-how information. Up to January 2007, 1995 programs by 350 bodies have been put on the site.

For another project, developing promotion programs, they selected six local places as the action research sites in 2006 as follows:

1. Numazu, Shizuoka for Short stay: blue tourism design and monitor tour operation. (Blue tourism is to experience of fishing village.)

2. Kubokawa, Kochi for Long stay: country life all in one experience monitor tour operation
3. Ashikawa, Yamanashi for Almost settled: farmhouse reuse workshop and vacant house database construction.
4. Oguni, Yamagata for Coming and Going: herb picking and mushroom hunting monitor tour operation
5. a: Sekikawa, Niigata for Taking part: farming experience program developing and monitor tour operation  
b: Kijo, Miyazaki for Taking part: farmhouse lodging monitor tour

These selected sites are all remote small villages that have been working hard at green tourism with considerable success. Therefore, the monitor tours sampled the programs that have already well organized. According to their reports on web site, the participants from the city are satisfied with colorful events and warm hospitality. It seems that whole events is to entertain the guests from the city, while the hosts, local people, work to give them leisure as well as show them their place as the tourist attractions. Therefore, it is doubtful that visitors get touch with a real local life including its problems and local people get some idea from the city people to improve their life. Communication here stays on surface in terms of community improvement

### **Allotment with Accommodations**

The significant project of the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries under this policy is a promotion of the allotment with accommodations. With this project, they intend to get involved city people in farming, especially in a place being inadequate to operate mechanized agriculture. The allotment is planned as the first step for city people to settle in the country. With the national government subsidy, many local governments have been establishing allotment sites in rural area. Most of them consist of 20 to 30 lots with a bungalow and a vegetable plot each.

Sizunosato Kleingarten in Simane is one of them and located in a mountainous village being 2hours by car from Hiroshima city. There are 20 lots of 300 square meters each with a 52 square meter bungalow and a 120 square meter vegetable plot. The bungalow is equipped with CATV and the

Internet. Farm machines and implements are rental. The lease is one year and renewable four times at maximum. The rent is ¥384000 per year.

For social activities, a clubhouse, a common workhouse and a charcoal kiln are provided. The vegetable growing course giving by the local people is also an activity to get acquainted with each other. Since the Town Settlement Support Center provides information on the bungalows in the allotment together with public housing and other accommodations, the allotment might draw the settlers into the town. In spite of these attempts for city people to integrate themselves into a local community, as far as the community improvement, there are crucial matters to be concerned: the allotment site is a unit separated from the town and its residents don't use existing farmland. Therefore the allotment seems to be a place where primarily the people in the city enjoy leisure in rural area.

## 2. Reuse of farmhouse

### **Reuse of fork house**

According to a research on the conversion of old fork house in Kanto area, central Japan, the variety of its reuse are recognized. 96 out of 203 cases are cultural facilities such as a museum, an interpretive center, and a library, 60 are commercial institutions such as a restaurant, a gallery, a souvenir shop, and a tourist information center, and 35 are community facilities such as a community center and an interpretive center. Besides, some of them are conversed into accommodation facilities to give their guests an experience of a rural life providing interpretive programs. Welfare facilities such as a nursing home are also seen with a small number as the newest examples.

We can find similar evidences in rural area through the country. Many of traditional farmhouses with historical value are designated as a cultural asset in various levels, both national and local, and often used as a museum in many ways. Since restaurants converted from an old farmhouse are regarded fashionable at present, there is a certain market for them, especially for houses in a snow region, because their structure is solid and appearance matches an image of traditional farmhouse. There are, however, few of them used in an

original site. Most of them are carried out into other places, leaving the area empty. That even if they remain as they are, they are destined to be abandoned and decay is another problem.

The number community facilities and welfare facilities converted from a farmhouse has been increasing through the country, too. For example, Chiba Nature School, a NPO working for rural area improvement in Southern Chiba, is planning to convert an old farmhouse into an interpretive center to give programs the city people to experience the way of a rural life, taking care of the house and its surroundings. Kodama is an elderly day care house converted from an old farmhouse in Central Chiba. They repair a ruinous abandoned farmhouse and add a slope for wheelchairs at the front. They keep tatami rooms and furnishings as they have been and garden is to be a place for therapeutic gardening. Elderly people feel at home here because it reminds them their home in their childhood.

### **Owner's weak motivation to lend their house in a rural area**

According to a research on reuse of vacant house by the Ministry of Land, Infrastructure and Transport in 2006, the number of vacant houses in a rural area will increase rapidly from 3,260,000 in 2003 to 4,600,000 in 2020 with vacant house ratio 18%. However, the owner's motivation to lend their house is very weak. Only 6 out of 85 vacant house owners lend their house. 80% of the owners who don't lend their house don't have intention of lending their house. The reasons are: they use it in special occasions such as the New Year holidays and Buddhist memorial services when their families return home from the city, and Buddhist alter is kept there. The conditions for lent are: a tenant is trustful or the information of the tenant available beforehand, and the term is only the period when the owner don't use the house.

These results show the local people's strong attachment to their house. They have succeeded their house from generation to generation together with their farmland. The house has been the center of their life and they have been keeping it with hard work. Even the house is vacant the ancestors' spirits stay there with Buddhist alter. Therefore, they feel uneasiness to outsiders taking over their property. Besides, they have a responsibility to maintain their

community. If they introduce the tenants who act against the community, it will be their fault.

### **Vacant house information providing system**

To promote the vacant house utilization and to increase the population of their place, some local governments and citizens establish a system called “Akiya Bank”, an information providing system for both owners who intend to sell or rent their house and people in the city who are interested in living in rural area. This system is based on the exceptional measures that make enable NPOs to work as a sort of agent for housing lease business. Akiya Bank is helpful especially in a rural area where the real estate business is absent. In addition, the vacant house owners tend to regard the information by the system as reliable because the system is taken care of by governments or citizen organizations.

We can find many Akiya Banks on Website. This system, however, does not seem to work effectively. In order to avoid government’s unwilling involvement in potential troubles with the contract, after providing information, it leaves a negotiation process to the parties concerned.

Naturally, there are a few exceptions. A system in Kawamata machi in Fukushima is one of them. Kawamata machi is a town in a mountain district in Northern Japan. The number of their population decrease from 20000 in 1989 to 17000 in 2005 and 35% of them are over 60 year old. Their system is called New Life Stage Registration System that indicates it is designed not only to increase population but to find someone who become an active member of their community.

We can see their intention in its registration process. To register in this system, the applicants are required to write a short essay of self-introduction and the reasons to live in the town as well as to make an accommodation and job application. With these papers and an interview the town office personnel makes certain that the applicant keeps good relation with the community and respects the way of living in this town. After that the registration for the system is accepted. An outline of vacant house information alone appears on the Website. Through a person in charge, one can get its full information. Farther



more, the same person in charge witnesses and supports all the negotiation process. This system also includes programs for giving information on local living, guiding in various matters for starting a new life and getting acquainted anyone who could be a mentor for living in the town.

This example shows that to make Akiya Bank system effective, both of the provider of information services and the applicant for them should get involved the matter personally and work together from the start.

### Conclusion

When vacant house owners live in a city, the easiest and feasible way to handle it seems to sell it. Getting some assistance with Akiya Bank, they could find a buyer. However, practically, it is difficult to find an appropriate buyer in many rural areas, and its market value does not match with one that the owners expect. Moreover, if they sell it, they will lose their home house and a direct connection with their homeland.

Under the current government policy of double dwelling, it is within possibilities that the owners living in the city get involved in a reuse program of their house in rural area. With their involvement, they can keep their house alive with its history and their connection with their homeland. As regards rural area improvement, the programs could become more community oriented including their farmlands as well as the house and other facilities. Besides, the owners could work as an intermediary between the city and the country because they are familiar with both city and country life. Furthermore, they could add personal touch to them.

The idea of the owner's involvement to a farmhouse reuse program is new although there are a few personal cases, and the way of farmhouse reuse differs with the situation of the owner, the house itself and its location. Therefore, advocacy and the case study are required at first stage followed by categorizing them into several types based on the situation above mentioned. Arranging a system for consulting on each case by professionals will comes next.

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