Culture-led Reuse of Former Elementary Schools: A Survey of Echigo-Tsumari Art Triennial's Involvement in Tokamachi, Japan

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Abstract

This study focuses on the Echigo-Tsumari Art Triennial's occupation of former elementary schools in the area of Tokamachi. This contemporary art festival was launched in 2000 in an attempt to revive interest in this remote part of Japan. Through on-site observations, surveys, and interviews, this study first reviews the overall situation of closed educational facilities in the region. Then, a case-by-case description of the festival's involvement was researched. It was discovered that the festival holds a prominent position in providing new uses for such unused facilities in the region. However, depending on the model of usage agreement, various degrees of occupation can be distinguished. Variations of activity timing, program, spatial occupation, and involved stakeholders, allowed the authors to theorize on the capacity of each model to bring change into these localities, and the region.

Keywords: rural; closed schools; reuse; culture-led; Echigo-Tsumari Art Triennial

1. Introduction: Rural Decline in Japan

The shrinking and aging of the Japanese population, coupled with continuous polarization effects towards urban centers, have led to a clear dissolution of the countryside (Nishino, 2012). Entire villages are left abandoned, public services are shutting down due to lack of attendance, and living standards are declining. With little prospects, younger generations are among the first to leave rural areas.

A national survey reported that since 2003, every year, more than 400 schools shut down mainly due to poor attendance rate (MEXT, 2010). At this rate, the Japanese government is eager to find ways to repurpose these vacant spaces –especially since public properties still impede costs to local administrations despite their redundancy. Although procedures to repurpose underutilized public stock were facilitated, and compliances with general building laws were softened, the recycling of buildings in rural areas is still doubtful –considering that local demand and resources are continually decreasing, and, remoteness is hindering the appeal for external parties to settle in.

The challenge for the Japanese countryside is thus double: beside the burden of what to do with unused facilities, the countryside is in need of place-making strategies that will bring interest back to the area.

Signs of rural decline unfolded already in the 50’s with the rapid economic growth of the country. However, following the Great East Japan Earthquake of March 11, 2011, a growing interest for the fate and sustainable development of remote rural communities can be noticed. In response, the national government has been eager to promote place-making strategies that highlight the specificities of local regions to draw concern, interest, and investment back to the countryside. To achieve this, it appears that culture and 'art projects' are holding a striking position.

2. Research Motivation: Culture-led Revitalization

Resorting to cultural endeavors is nothing new. Ever since the 1980’s, culture has been recognized as an essential amenity to improve the general quality of life of urban centers and ex-industrial cities (Florida, 2005; Charles, 2000). However, a similar model has begun to appear in rural settings across the globe. For instance, Walk&Talk - a participative public art festival on the island of São Miguel, Açores- or the Wall Art Festival in India, or even the Setouchi Art Triennial around the islands of Naoshima in Japan, etc. The number of examples has stirred up interest among academics seeking to comprehend the potentialities of art and culture in remote shrinking contexts (Gibson, 2010; Bell & Jayne, 2000).
3. The Echigo-Tsumari Art Triennale (ETAT)

ETAT sprung from a prefectural incentive that pushed regions to rely on the specificities of their environment to overcome socio-economic decline (Klien, 2010; Kitagawa, 2015). To this end, the municipalities of Tsunan and Tokamachi formed in 1996 a union on the elaboration of the Art Necklace Development Plan. This seven years long, large-scale revitalization plan was based on four strategies: 1) the establishment of an arts festival, 2) the promotion of the region's natural landscape, 3) the maintenance of existing infrastructures and embellishments of public spaces, 4) the shaping of distinctive identities for each area of the region. Fundamental to this plan is the built environment of the countryside. Although the project has already come to term, the popularity of the arts' festival and an increasing amount of private support has allowed the festivities to continue.

Every three years, artists from all countries are invited to create site-specific artworks engaging the specificity of the environmental, social and cultural context of the Echigo-Tsumari region. Since its first iteration more than a thousand interventions, ranging from sculptures, sound works, theater, art installations, performances, musical shows, landscape and urban design projects and architectural constructions, etc., have been dispersed across this 762 km² area.

Through this iterative process, ETAT has seen its production and method of action evolve according to the needs and resources available. During the introducing event in 2000, significant artworks and renowned artists were showcased. Then, the artistic directors focused on engaging more deeply the region and its local communities to strengthen interactions. In 2004, a devastating earthquake hit the region, calling for extraordinary solidarity movements among villages and outsiders to reconstruct and clean the aftermath. Inspired by this hardship, for the third festival, the organizers sought to improve their volunteering platform. Now the Kohebi (the name given to the volunteers) are crucial to the smooth implementation of the festival and its integration with the region and local communities. The earthquake also marked the importance of dealing with abandoned facilities, as they are more prone to deterioration and risks of collapsing. Hence, the 2006 investigation led by ETAT’s committee on vacant spaces in the region, resulting in the conscious reuse of deserted facilities for the 2009 ETAT. In 2012, new financial supports were granted and, the festival sought to refine their various fields of action. In 2015, new Asian exchange routes were strengthened. The director of the festival, Fram Kitagawa multiplies his talks and presentations about ETAT internationally, and the number of volunteers coming from Asia is increasing.

4. Research Purpose and Scope of Study

Since ETAT’s attention in dealing with the reuse of vacant spaces, its Modus Operandi has grown to resemble a managing platform tackling the recovery of the region's declining built environment. It is through this aspect that ETAT stands out as a valuable case study for architects and urban planners who (by the nature of their profession) try ‘to construct and plan’ better places despite the challenges of a shrinking context. As can be seen in Fig.1., functional educational establishments are located in more central locations, while remote facilities had to find new purposes. To comprehend ETAT’s role in the alleviation of abandoned elementary schools in the area, this research sought to first determine the extent of its contribution, then to undertake a detailed accounting of its involvement. Subsequently, thanks to a better understanding of ETAT’s modes of reuse, valuable lessons regarding the positive benefits of cultural repurposing can be taken and generalized to other cases.

A couple of studies on ETAT’s reuse of former schools have already been published in Japanese. Among these, Ogawa and Mori (2010) described in detail the reuse process of 4 schools (Senda, Akakura, Karekimata, Sansho) and highlighted the positive social benefits brought by the festival to local communities when residents participate in the making process of the artworks, and the planning, and management of each...
event. Tanma (2013) made a comparative study on the
demand of two types of school reconversion: on one
side as a museum (illustrated by Sanada elementary
school) and on the other into an accommodation
facility (exemplified by the Sansho elementary school).
Based on interviews with residents, the work of Keiji
(2013) takes a more pro-active stance by suggesting
three possible reuses for Kyoutsukyou elementary
school—as a mixed-use facility, a dormitory space, or a
learning facility.

These studies do provide an understanding of
how ETAT functions and brings to some degree new
opportunities for local inhabitants. They however,
present each case independently, as singular instances.
Contrasting this, this study differs from previously
cited references through a complete overview of all
implementations, so as to bring a new understanding of
ETAT’s occupation of former educational buildings as
being part of a grand-scale regional strategy aiming at
revitalizing the entire region of Tokamachi.

5. Status of Schools in Tokamachi

A census survey was submitted to the administration
office of Tokamachi1 (in fall 2014). The collected data
(the closing date, the current status of reuse, the year
of reuse), rendered in Fig.2. reveal that as of 2016, 29
establishments are still standing, from which only 4 (or
14%) remain unused. In comparison, the 2012 national
recordings recorded 27% of vacancies in former
schools of the county (MEXT, 2010). This clearly
attests to Tokamachi’s pro-active stance on reusing
schools of the area.

Closer attention to the figure reveals that 14 out of
25 of the repurposed establishments are somewhat
involved with art and/or cultural enterprises. This
attests to the popularity of creative reuses. The other
establishments are being repurposed with various
activities, such as school no. 18, which holds a training
center for wrestling—where even national champions
train; or base centers for seminars like school no. 20 or
no. 19 which is now managed by Waseda University.

Among the art-related repurposed facilities, only
two locations are not operated by ETAT (11 and 10).
The first has since 1988 been turned into a museum
specializing in Indian art, called Mithila. While the
second, was recently transformed into a pottery
center holding exhibitions, and an atelier—building
new links with the cultural past of the region where
unique ornamental ceramics from the Jōmon period
(14000-300 BC) were found intact during excavations.
Attention to the closing year of schools (dotted line in
the figure) and the entry year of new functions reveals
deeper insights about the region's reuse of former
elementary schools. Such as 1) between 1985 and
1995, a series of closures happened, but the number of
reuses remained low and various. Then followed a
short period with no further schools closing down,
however, restructuring resumed from 2001 till now at
almost the same time that ETAT activities started in the
region. In 2009, ETAT marked its intention to reinvest
in abandoned facilities, and nine establishments were
then repurposed. In March 2014, three additional
locations closed, one already integrated the 2015
ETAT festival, while discussions among ETAT’s
committee and local administrations are still being
held on how to integrate the two others in the future.
These proceedings seem to suggest that an automatism
is in place, whereas as soon as a school closes down,
local agencies and the committee of ETAT review the
potential for the location to be used during the festival.
However, despite the festival's predominant role in
alleviating the region of vacant public facilities, their
rehabilitation, and sustainable reuse is not guaranteed in
the long run. Previously, the festival occupied two of
the four schools that are at the moment still vacant (nos. 8
and 9). A private business bought the school no. 8 called
Senda, but since the transaction, the new occupants have
not yet moved in, allowing the building to deteriorate.
This example led to the following understanding of
ETAT's actual reuse of elementary schools.

6. ETAT's Involvement

A series of on-site observations and face-to-
face interviews with different stakeholders (such as
inhabitants, managers, the mayor, director, staff, and
volunteers) were conducted to determine the various
repurposing schemes of ETAT (see Table 1.).

6.1 The Management

6.1.1 Types of Agreements

In most cases, the establishments still belong to
local administrations. However, three types of usage
agreements with ETAT were concluded:

T1) Managed by Tokamachi: ETAT occupies schools
without any formal agreement. In consortium with
local citizens, these schools retain temporary artworks
and activities only for the duration of the festival—
amounting to approximately 50 days every three years.
facilities free of charge for renewable periods of five years. Sanada school (no. 5) is the only exception for which the NPO purchased the establishment from the city. According to an interview with the manager of the school (a Tokyoite woman in her 30's, who moved to Tokamachi after volunteering for the festival as a kohei), the transaction was done "for a very low price."

A combination of private and public sources provide an allowance given to 'Art Front Gallery' (AFG) - a private business in Tokyo responsible for the artistic production of ETAT- to cover costs related to the artworks (artist and material fee). Costs related to general restoration, maintenance and usage costs of the building (water and electricity bills, cleaning fee, management fee, etc.), are born by public funds, even for the establishments managed by the festival NPO. In turn, all income made through entrance ticketing and sales of derived products are injected back to the public administrations' fund.

Only the school purchased by the NPO (no. 5) and Higashikawa (school no. 10, sponsored by the Benesse Corporation), bear independently all costs for their occupation and activity planning. However, costs associated with activities happening during the festival period are still covered by the allowance fee given to AFG for planning and implementing the ETAT festival.

Itemization of expenses related to each school could not be gathered due to secrecy obligations concerning the artists' creative process. Though approximate costs were obtained for the schools managed by the NPO. It is interesting to note that the amount of the bill has no direct relation to the size of the school (see Table 2.). Higashikawa School (no. 10) is almost four times bigger than Shimizu (no. 7) and yet the costs are

T2) Individual management: the village's mayor manages the school of Azamihira (no. 8). Here, ETAT's activities are happening in parallel with the mayor's agenda for his community. His close contact with the inhabitants allowed rapid rehabilitation of the school after it was shut down in 1986. First, machines to make ropes were introduced on the ground floor of the establishment (Niigata, 2004). However, now, the village of Azamihira has only 54 residents, of which more than half are over 65 years old, causing all activities to cease. Following the first ETAT, the mayor saw immediately the potential for the village to take part in the festivities. With continuous investment in the festival through the socially engaged art of Japanese artist Katsuhiro Hibino, the village has revived the time of the festivities.

T3) Schools Managed by the NPO: the Echigo-Tsumari Satoyama Cooperation Mechanism – the non-profit organization responsible for the planning and implementation of the festival locally occupies

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### Table 1. On Site Interviews

| Date       | School | Interviewee |
|------------|--------|-------------|
| 16-17 March 2014 | 9 | 2 staffs + manager |
| 5          | manager |
| 7          | manager |
| 21-25 June 2014 | 1 | 1 inhabitant + 2 staffs |
| 2          | 3 inhabitants |
| 5          | 3 inhabitants |
| 6          | 3 inhabitants |
| 7          | 2 inhabitants + volunteer |
| 8          | 2 inhabitants |
| 10         | 2 volunteers |
| 11         | 1 inhabitant + 2 staffs |
| 27 July 2014 | all | Fram Kitagawa (director) |
| 30 May 2016  | all | Tokamachi administration |

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### Table 2. Details of ETAT’s Repurposing of Schools

| Schol Nb | Typ e | Jurisdiction service | Agreement length | Occupancy time (nb. of days) | Users | N. Visitors | Name | Structure size (m2) | Remodeling |
|----------|-------|----------------------|------------------|-----------------------------|-------|-------------|------|-------------------|------------|
| 1        | T1    | Educational Services | 2 months         | 53 51 0 50 53 51 0 50    | 5     | 11,614      | Soil Museum | concrete 2200 | 2 classroom remodeling |
| 2        | T1    | Finance Services    | 2 months         | 53 51 0 50 53 51 0 50    | 5     | 7,383       | - 13 | concrete 445      | None       |
| 3        | T1    | Tourism Exchange Division | 2 months | 53 51 0 50 53 51 0 50    | 5     | 8,280       | ETAT 2009 | concrete 545      | None       |
| 4        | T1    | Educational Services | 2 months         | 53 51 0 50 53 51 0 50    | 5     | 8,126       | ETAT 2009 | concrete 545      | None       |
| 5        | T1    |Educational Services | 2 months         | 53 51 0 50 53 51 0 50    | 5     | 23,982      | ETAT 2009 | concrete 1230     | None       |
| 6        | T1    | Educational Services | 2 months         | 53 51 0 50 53 51 0 50    | 5     | 6,264       | ETAT 2009 | concrete 760      | None       |
| 7        | T1    | Educational Services | 2 months         | 53 51 0 50 53 51 0 50    | 5     | 7,383       | ETAT 2009 | concrete 576       | None       |
| 8        | T2    | Educational Services | 2 months         | 53 51 0 50 53 51 0 50    | 5     | 7,383       | ETAT 2009 | concrete 576       | None       |
| 9        | T2    | Educational Services | 2 months         | 53 51 0 50 53 51 0 50    | 5     | 7,383       | ETAT 2009 | concrete 576       | None       |
| 10       | T2    | Educational Services | 2 months         | 53 51 0 50 53 51 0 50    | 5     | 7,383       | ETAT 2009 | concrete 576       | None       |
| 11       | T2    | Educational Services | 2 months         | 53 51 0 50 53 51 0 50    | 5     | 7,383       | ETAT 2009 | concrete 576       | None       |
| 12       | T2    | Educational Services | 2 months         | 53 51 0 50 53 51 0 50    | 5     | 7,383       | ETAT 2009 | concrete 576       | None       |
| 13       | T2    | Educational Services | 2 months         | 53 51 0 50 53 51 0 50    | 5     | 7,383       | ETAT 2009 | concrete 576       | None       |

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1. Higashi Shimogami, 2. Tobishi, 3. Kuretakuma, 4. Akakura, 5. Sanda, 6. Miyakamaya, 7. Shimizu, 8. Azamihira, 9. Sanpo, 10: Higashikawa, 11: Kyitosiko, 12: Tsumari, 13: Katakuri N.av: Not available  Ha: Habitat  N.ap: Not applicable
almost equal. In comparison, Sansho school (no. 9) is two times smaller, but expenses for running the school are six times higher. Therefore, it can be concluded that space has no real impact on the occupation costs. Instead, it is the kind of program, artwork, or artist that will influence the costs of usage and maintenance.

6.2 The Reuses
6.2.1 Program
As mentioned earlier, the type of usage agreement affects the kind of reuse of a school. In the Type 1 model of reuse, periods of cultural activity are spaced out by long periods of inactivity. The short-term occupation has rather positive and negative consequences concerning any attempt at place-making strategy. On one hand, changing artworks yield unpredictable turnouts. For example, in the case of Higashi Shimogumi (no. 1), the number of visitors almost doubled from one event to the other, whereas for Akakura (no. 4), visits decreased nearly seven times in 2012. On the other, short occupations by the festival allow other users to benefit from the vacant space. Such is the case for Kyoutsukyou (no. 11), where graduate students of Koritsu Women's University have been using the space as accommodation when conducting research in the area. In Higashi Shimogumi (no. 1), neighboring inhabitants have established a food processing business and now sell their products in various commercial locations of the region. In other schools, the gymnasiurns are occasionally used by the residents to practice sports, or as gathering spaces for festive events. The multi-purpose potential of the facilities allows various stakeholders to find their interest and assure continuous use of the space.

In Type 2, the artist and the mayor in charge are equally invested in invigorating the village of Azamihira. Through an agreement, the artist conducts annual seasonal events (eg: winter festival, spring seedling planting, and summer festival). He can then entertain a continuous and close relationship with the community and the place, bringing people together around participatory activities. It seems that the short, serial character of events or workshop activities are well adapted to advanced-shrinking communities, forming a non-durable commitment.

In the Type 3 model, the NPO takes control of reusing the facility for a longer period, while maintaining full authority and responsibility for programming activities. Consequently, operations are carried out even outside the festival season to assure a constant animation of the location. Naturally, this limits the opportunity for other stakeholders to pursue their independent agenda. However, employment opportunities are often available.

6.2.2 Spatial Transformation
Aside from the cleaning and emptying of the rooms done by volunteers, the schools being reused for a short period, didn't undergo any significant alterations (see Table 2.). These schools all have structures in concrete, which are in good condition and ready to be used. However, one might think that although the occupation period is short, the investment in the school is less transformative and invasive. This is not true for Higashi Shimogumi school. The establishment has been renamed the Soil Museum, and holds art pieces using soil to transform the interior radically (as can be seen in the right of Fig.3.). Also, as stated earlier two classrooms on the ground floor were turned into a food-processing kitchen. Under the initiative of a few inhabitants, inspired by the art festival to also take advantage of the school's vacancy (says one of the cooks, a woman in her 40's), they installed cooking appliances to establish a business out of local agricultural products. The interviewee confided that at the moment they are not yet making much profit, but they have received the help of the festival and the region to invite outsiders to buy their products. Such as the design contest to help conceive a packaging for their watermelon jam. The final result received the 2012 Asian design award. For which she was proud.

Sanada school was turned into a museum retaining the work of the artist Tashima Seizo, who named the place the "Picture Book and Nuts Museum." In order to respond to its new function, various structural and security regulations needed to be observed. The office Cycle Architects (based in Tokyo) supervised the renovations accordingly. On the ground floor, partitions between former classrooms were removed to make room for a café. New structural beams and columns were inserted to improve the stability of the overall building and ceilings on the second floor were removed to give room for the artist to express his creativity (Cycle Architects, 2009).

The Sansho school is now used as a hostel and seminar house for study groups. Already in 1987 the place stopped being used as an elementary school, and since various cycles of reuse, such as workshop location and hotel revived the establishment. But it has never been as lively as it is today because the entire region has undergone a transformative process attracting people and encouraging them to spend a few days in the area.
7. Conclusion

In aging and urbanized developed societies, such as Japan, the future of rural communities raises grave concern. Demographics are plunging, economies are staggering, and politicians are uncertain of what best course to take to solve the situation. As houses, and facilities are left abandoned, the built environment reflects the general decline of the countryside. Within this context, this study aimed to survey how the contemporary art festival of Echigo-Tsumari Art Triennale (ETAT) occupies closed elementary schools and helps maintain and restore the place.

Resulting from this research, it appears that ETAT holds a prominent role in handling unused elementary schools in the region of Tokamachi. Indeed half of all the schools reused in the region are taking part in ETAT (see chapter 5). However, the degree of repurposing ETAT varies according to the usage agreements concluded between ETAT and local administrations as can be seen in the following table:

| T1: Local Authorities | T2: Local Village | T3: ETAT’s NPO |
|-----------------------|------------------|---------------|
| Short period of time  | Regular period of | Continuous period of |
| No particular         | time             | time           |
| remodeling            | Remodeling       | Remodeling     |
| Multiple users         | Cooperation      | Controlled user |
| No employment         | Collaboration    | Employment     |
| Temporary Artworks    | Repeated         | Permanent Installations |
|                       | workshops/events | + other        |

While the intention of the festival is to repurpose as many schools as possible, it is clear that in reality, the intensity of the efforts varies from one model to the other, which implies questioning whether 1) there are variations of effectiveness within each model? And 2) what form of reuse best fits a situation?

A possible way to go is to conduct further research involving quantitative and qualitative data on ETAT’s reuse of schools. Collected information on the different aspects of the schools’ reuse can then be juxtaposed to geographical data of each site and their surroundings to evaluate their synergies critically. Moreover, further observations on the renovation process would yield interesting observations on the interaction between the ETAT committee and local craftsmen.

Nevertheless, at this point, it is interesting to stress the triennial character of the festival, allowing evolving, altering, or reversing the reuse of a school according to the knowledge, resources, and needs of the time. The iterative occupation allows for sustainable and constructive functions to arise naturally from within the context (such as in the case of Higashi Shimogumi, where the festival empowered residents to take action). It is in this regard that the value of this research lies, on one hand attesting to the diverse ways of repurposing these schools, and on the other leading the way to approach an understanding of such art initiatives in the countryside from the perspective of a planner. The underlying aim is to obtain specific tools of assessment leading to a critical review of the benefits of culture-led repurposing in a rural environment.

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Notes

1 The area of Tsunan was left out of this survey as only one repurposed case figures there and because dealing with a second municipality administration office would have exceeded the time limits of this study.
2 List of names of closed schools in Fig.2.: 1. Mitsuyama, 2. Ebi branch, 3. Kurokura branch, 4. Funasaka Yuki branch, 5. Keichi Yuki branch, 6. Mochi, 7. Matsuozato, 8. Senda, 9. Komichiyama, 10. Nonaka, 11. Oike, 12. Robka, 13. Takizawa branch, 14. Kiyoutsukyou, 15. Tobitari - Iketani branch, 16. Fujisawa branch, 17. Tamata branch, 18. Shionomata branch, 19. Gamo, 20. Shirakura, 21. Hakka, 22. Matsusho - Koyama.