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# Choosing new places to live: Alternative housing solutions for the elderly in Japan

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## Abstract:

With Japan's elderly people accounting for already more than 20% of the population in 2008, and estimated to grow to 30% by 2025, an enormous transformation of Japan's society is taking place. This also includes a change of the housing situation and living arrangements of elderly people. While living with one's children is still widespread in Japan, among the new generation of elderly a trend towards independence and self-reliance can be observed. Thus they favour living arrangements different from earlier generations. Being in better health, financially better off and 80% of them being homeowners, the outlook on their remaining years has changed significantly. Living alone or as a couple has become the most common way of living for the 65 plus generation. In the last few years, communal forms of living – age homogeneous or multi-generational, groups of six to about 30 people – have attracted attention. At present it is a new option for at least a small group of people, but likely to gain importance in the future, partly as an expression of new lifestyles, partly as an alternative to institutionalized housing.

This paper sheds light on these alternative housing projects in Japan. Data is based on fieldwork conducted in 2008 and 2009 in the Tokyo metropolitan area, including in-depth interviews with residents. The focus of the interviews is on the residents' housing histories, aimed at understanding the motives and preferences of residents concerning their choice of housing and in how far their housing histories may have been responsible for their housing decisions in later life.

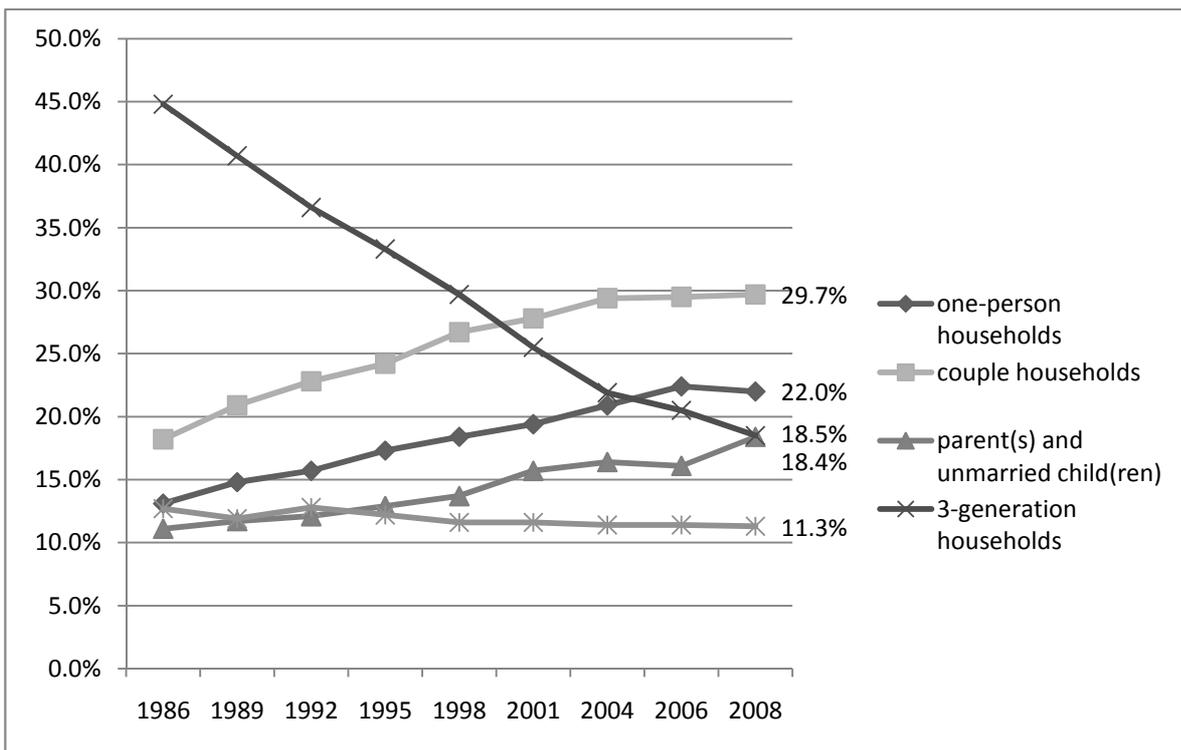
*Keywords: elderly; communal housing; alternative forms of living; Japan; qualitative interviews; grounded theory*

# 1. Introduction

The demographic development in Japan has led to a growing number and proportion of the elderly. In 2008, over one fifth (22.1%) of Japan’s population was 65 years and older resulting in 28.2 million elderly people (Naikakufu, 2009). These figures are predicted to grow further to about 30% or 36.4 million people by 2025 (IPSS, 2008), resulting in an enormous transformation of Japan’s society. This also includes a change of the housing situation and living arrangements of elderly people. One specific, particularly interesting form of living for the elderly that has emerged in the last few years is communal housing, either age-homogenous or multi-generational.

While living with one’s children is, compared to Western countries, still widespread in Japan, family structures and functions are changing rapidly. In the last few decades three-generation households have been declining; elderly couple households and one-person households are, in contrast, increasing. According to official statistics households containing at least one elderly person amount to 41.2% of all households (MHLW, 2008). Looking at households with elderly people reveals that one-person households (22.0%) and couple households (29.7%) make up more than half of all these households (Fig.1).

Fig. 1: Household forms of households with elderly people

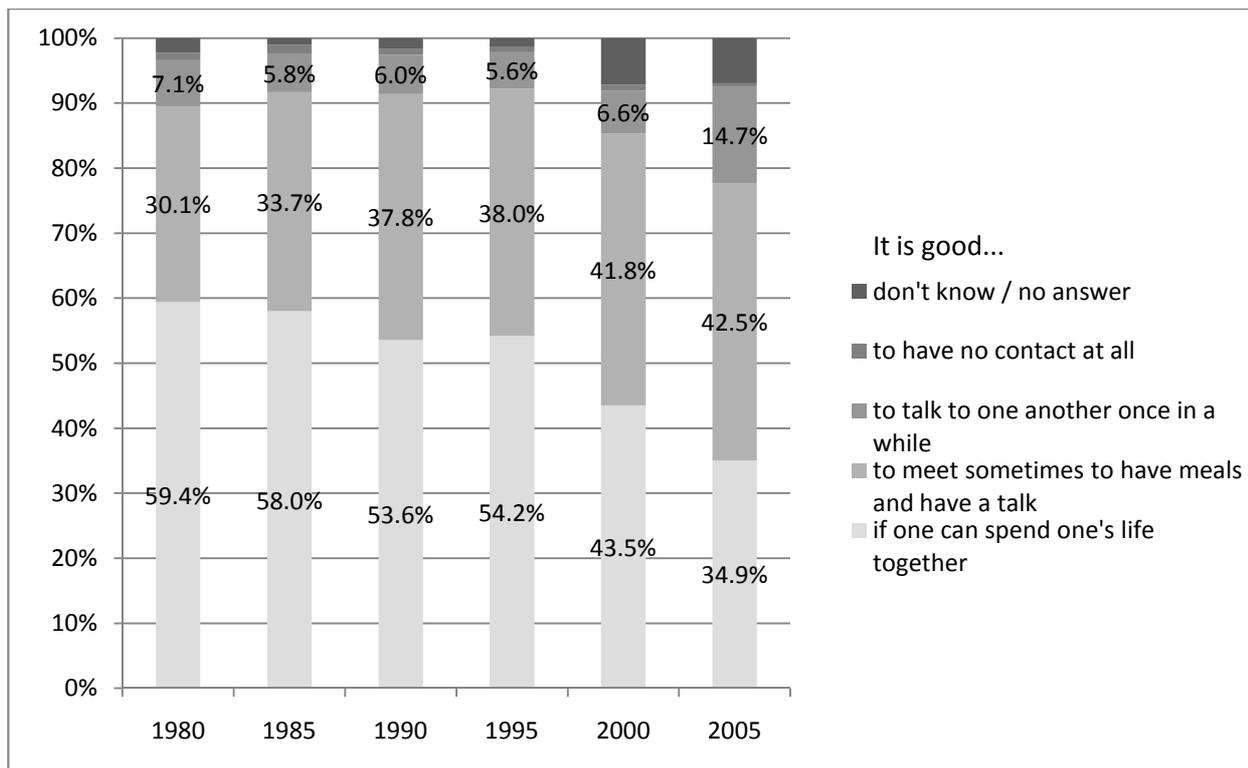


Source: MHLW (2008).

It can be assumed that a number of the elderly although they may wish to live with their children may not be able to do so because their children migrated to the metropolitan centres of Japan during the time of economic growth especially in the 1960s and 1970s and / or because of insufficient space in the densely built (sub)urban area dwellings to accommodate a multi-generational family (Suzuki, 2006; IPSS, 2008).

Moreover, changes in family composition and women's increased employment are making it difficult to maintain formerly common care structures for the elderly (Long, 2008; Mine, 2008; pp. 5). Being in better health, benefitting from the public pension system, which was introduced in 1961, and 80% being homeowners (Sōmushō Tōkeikyoku, 2005; Naikakufu, 2009) the older people today, however, differ from earlier generations. When asked how much time they want to spend with their children or grandchildren, elderly people decreasingly prefer to spend their lives with their descendants (Fig. 2).

Fig. 2: Preferred relation of elderly people to their children and grandchildren



Note: Sample: men and women 60 years and over.

Source: Naikakufu (2005).

Thus it can be assumed that living arrangements different from earlier generations are favoured, a fact that opens up chances for new forms of living. Communal forms of living similar to co-housing in Europe and the US (e.g., organised by the residents or organised by non-profit organisations) may be one form. They are certainly not a mainstream phenomenon in Japan at present, but their number is growing in spite of the fact that house sharing is unusual even for students in Japan.

Moreover, the attention of the media is high, not only because these housing forms are perceived as a possibility for coping with the growing number of elderly people but also because these projects attract a lot of interest – some communal houses have regular “open house” days or have a long waiting list of visitors. Alternative housing is, however, not just a surrogate for political deficits. It is also an expression of the older people themselves departing from traditional ways of living, which is becoming apparent in their actively taking part in forming new types of living arrangements.

## **1.1 Forms of communal housing in Japan**

Communal forms of living for elderly people already emerged in a very small number in the 1970s as a welfare measure in snowy and remote regions, where the unfavourable demographic development had led to uncommon actions by the local governments, and again after the Awaji-Hanshin Earthquake in 1995 as a means to accommodate elderly people who had lost their homes. Alternative housing projects for the elderly that were not part of public housing schemes but organised privately were built in a significantly increasing number after the non-profit organisation law came into effect in 1998 (Sasaki, 2000; pp. 3, 9–11). The introduction of the public long-term care insurance in 2000 had a similarly important impact on the growth of alternative housing projects (Sasaki, 2000; pp. 7–12).

Since the projects are strongly influenced by their initiators and residents and do not follow any standardised pattern concerning size or the way the communal part of life in these houses is organised. They are extremely diverse, meeting ideals, preferences and needs of different groups of people. Most of the projects are aimed solely at elderly people as residents. These projects often provide an infrastructure of support and help services, taking into account that frailties and ailments will probably occur with growing age and which can be made use of if required. To enable residents to stay until their deaths (i.e., age in place) is an aim for some of the projects. Often, regular services for preparing meals, cleaning and general assistance are organised by a non-profit organisation (NPO) from the start. The houses are usually accessible by wheelchair and equipped with handrails in bathrooms and corridors.

Some of the projects have a multi-generational focus. Their main task is not providing care for the elderly but mutual help and communal activities aimed at making this form of living attractive to people of all generations. In both forms each person or household has a complete private living space, but in addition large common space is provided where common meals or gatherings take place. The houses which I selected for my fieldwork were all rented, but projects owned by the residents also exist.

This paper aims to understand what kind of residents choose this form of living that differs so much from conventional households based on kinship that had formed the norm of living arrangements in Japan. Do their (housing) biographies deviate from the “standard biography”, which began to emerge in Japan in the 1960s? How far are their housing histories responsible for their housing decisions in later life? Are these histories as exceptional as their way of housing? What are their needs concerning housing? What do they expect from communal forms of housing? This paper presents some of the results of research still in progress. I will first outline my approach and my sample of interviewees and then present and discuss my findings before coming to a preliminary conclusion.

## **1.2 Methodical approach**

To answer the above questions I decided on a grounded theory approach which seems suitable for this research because it enables me to understand the informants’ complex housing stories and to develop theories directly from my data – rather than applying existing categories and theories in a field that has not been sufficiently researched, yet. Especially Charmaz’ (2006) approach of constructing meaning promises insights into the individual motivations for moving into communal living.

In contrast to a study conducted by Shu-li Chen *et al.* (2008) on the process of decisions elderly people made before moving into assisted living in the US, my own approach follows that of Nishi Ritsuko's (1998), a geographer, and Caroline Holland's (2001), a gerontologist, by assuming that the way people lived as children or in their following life stages – that is, their housing histories (or housing careers, housing biographies) – influence their decision about how to live when growing old. Individual experiences of housing are probably as important as cohort experiences. Choosing an alternative form of living, therefore, may be rooted in former ways of living or certain attitudes towards living and housing that have developed over the years. By focusing on the individual residents' histories my study differs from those that give an account of the development, structure and organization of forms of communal housing in Japan and concentrate on the present living situation of residents (Ōhashi, 2002; Sasaki, 2004; Koyabe, 2004; Koyabe 2006).

I started conducting in-depth interviews<sup>1</sup> asking people living in alternative forms of housing to tell me about their housing histories from childhood on. The interviews included a set of prepared questions concerning housing and living arrangements, but took a free-flow format in most cases and lasted between one hour and over three hours.

### **1.3 Sample**

The houses chosen for the interviews were selected either because of prior contact to organisers of communal housing or because of positive response to my letters of enquiry. The organizers, in turn, asked the residents, and, in two cases, I was invited to take part in a common event where I had the chance to ask the residents directly for an interview. So far I have talked to twelve people living either in multi-generational communal housing or in elderly-only communal housing, located in Tokyo and in the adjoining Kanagawa prefecture. All five houses are located in residential neighbourhoods and were established between 2003 and 2009. Three of the houses are multi-generational self-organised houses. They were initiated by the same NPO, however this NPO is not involved in organising the daily life of the houses. According to statements from residents and organisers as well as from my own observations decisions are made by the residents only. The residents have teamed up in different committees, each being responsible for a number of tasks such as organising the cleaning schedule, organising the food storage, gardening etc. As one of the common activities dinner is prepared as a common meal three to seven times a week, depending on the agreement of the residents.

The two houses for elderly people only, in contrast, rely considerably on the support of NPOs and on volunteer staff, mostly from the neighbourhood, who are present daily, although regular meetings of the residents to make decisions do exist (to a smaller or greater extent). Cleaning of the common space and other tasks are not the responsibility of the residents. Preparing meals is not a joint undertaking in these two houses. And while breakfast is prepared by each person for her/himself, lunch and dinner are ordered or prepared by volunteers with the help of the residents, a pattern often found in elderly-only communal

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<sup>1</sup> The interviews were conducted in Japanese. All citations of the transcribed interviews have been translated by the

housing in Japan. Although it is not a common feature of elderly-only communal houses, both houses have a restaurant on the ground floor, operated by the NPO, which may be used by the residents, usually for lunch, as well as by the public. Integration into and interaction with the neighbourhood is an aim explicitly formulated in both cases and achieved by organising events or regular activities, which are joined by the residents as well as by neighbours. One house has a day-care centre for elderly people on the ground floor and also an after-school-care facility for primary and middle school children in one section of the quite spacious building.

Eleven of the twelve people interviewed were women, reflecting not only the fact that elderly women form the majority of elderly people in general (16 million women as opposed to 12 million men [age 65+; Naikakufu, 2009]) but also that the vast majority of the residents of communal houses I visited were women. (Men make up about one third of the residents in the three multi-generational houses, but they are mostly in their twenties to forties, therefore this group was not considered for this research project.) The youngest person interviewed was in the second half of her fifties, the oldest in her late eighties. This wide age range means that there is a generation between the youngest and the oldest, thus suggesting quite diverse reasons for their housing decisions, not only because of the specific housing needs at a certain age, but also because of different personal and cohort experiences influenced by social and cultural realities at a given time (e.g., being affected by the Pacific War, having had different access to education and to home ownership etc.).

Many of my informants have a background in middle-sized cities, only a few grew up in Tokyo; they usually moved to Tokyo in their adult years. Most of them have a standard family background with grandparents often co-residing – as it was the norm at that time. One woman lost her father during the war; two others lost a father or both parents respectively due to illnesses when they were still children, which resulted in a complicated family composition in one case. The majority came from a more or less economically stable background and lived in detached houses as children. In some cases, especially in those where a parent had died, the pre-war economic crisis as well as the war and its aftermath affected their living situation negatively, resulting in, among other things, poor housing conditions. Women (and men) born before the 1950s had much less access to education than today. Only about half of the women aged 60 and more graduated from high school (or the pre-war equivalent), among them about 7% who graduated from college or university (Sōmushō Tōkeikyoku, 2000). In comparison, my sample's education level is relatively high: one woman has a university degree, two a degree from a teacher training college. The majority of the others graduated from high school or the pre-war equivalent.

During their adult lives most of them established “normal” households and had – except for three of the interviewees – children. Nuclear family households were the most common form during their adult lives.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Nuclear family households peaked in 1975 with 63.9% (including couple-households) mainly because of the larger number of siblings as it was the custom that only the eldest son remained with the parents while the others established new households. Also in former times (going back at least to 1920 when the data were first collected) the percentage of nuclear family households exceeded 50%. However, in comparison to these earlier years, when the percentage of relative households other than nuclear family households (including three-generational households) was still high (1920: 38.2%), its share decreased steadily (2005: 12.4%) whereas the percentage of single-households has been rising strongly (1920: 6.0%, 2005: 27.9%) (for discussion: Ochiai, 1996; pp. 58–72; for data: IPSS, 2008, Tab. 7.11).

Only a few lived with their own parents or parents-in-law in three-generational households although care tasks for parents were often part of their lives. Climbing up the “housing ladder” from rental flats to home ownership – especially for those active on the housing market since the 1960s – was experienced by some of the interviewees. The housing histories of the others did not follow any pattern and were quite diverse, ranging from living in one house most of the time to more than twenty moves throughout their lives.

Most of my informants had been living alone before moving to the communal house with four exceptions: one woman had been living with her son’s family, one in a shared house or from time to time in her own conventional flat, one had moved in from a domestic violence shelter and the man left his spouse with whom he had been living in a two person household. At the time of the interviews the women were either widowed (with the spouse having died often a considerable time ago) or divorced; two were divorced from their first husband and widowed from the second. Given the fact that only about 5% of the women aged 65 and over in the Tokyo Prefecture (and 9% if one subtracts the women who were never married) were divorced according to the census of 2005, which asked for the present marital status (Sōmushō Tōkeikyoku, 2005), divorced women are strongly overrepresented in my sample. If not a factor of coincidence, this may also be a hint at who are the most likely residents of communal forms of living in Japan.

## 2. Results

### 2.1. “Permeable” and “secluded” houses

All of the older people interviewed, whether they lived as nuclear families or not, experienced “permeable houses” in their childhood: In addition to family members, which were more numerous than today due to a larger number of siblings or grandparents co-residing, it seems to have been common that neighbours were in and out at their homes or that they themselves went to the neighbours’ houses regularly. Not every house had a bath and not every family possessed a radio. These facilities were, therefore, shared with neighbours. In wealthier settings the houses were less permeable to neighbours, but attendants were present and the family business was often conducted at home, bringing employees and customers into the house. Many of my interviewees, irrespective of class, talked about having spent their childhood, to a great extent, outside playing with others. This experience is probably common to most of the Japanese born before the 1950s, but differs from the situation today (Senda, 1997; pp. 13–14).

The multiple dwelling houses built since the 1950s, which some of my informants experienced as adults, were, in contrast, characterised by seclusion. In these houses the nuclear family lived separated from the outside and other residents by an “iron door” (*testu no tobira*). Not knowing one’s neighbours was not unusual (Suzuki, 2002, 2006; pp. 258–260, 292–295). According to previous research (e.g. by Schmidtpott, 2005; pp. 160–162), the strong wish for privacy, which could be found mainly in the newly emerging middle class, had already started before the war and was further strengthened by the following factors: the experience of neighbourly surveillance during the war; the desperate housing situation due to war destruction; an additional housing shortage due to internal migration to the metropolitan areas; a continuing high percentage of housing without bath and cooking facilities in the years following the war (in 1973 only

31% of rental housing and 75% of owner-occupied houses had a bathroom [Housing Policy Division, 2003; p. 13]); and by the propagation of the nuclear family lifestyle, a lifestyle that was advocated by the American occupiers as well as by the Japanese government and which was reflected in the planning of the housing estates in the post-war era as well as in the way of living in urban areas in general.

The negative aspects of the seclusion of households were not brought up directly by my interview partners. But living in anonymous surroundings may have worsened the situation for one woman (Mrs. E., 69, divorced) who had to endure the violence of her husband for decades, yet it encouraged another woman (Mrs. T., 70, divorced, now widowed from her new partner), to overcome these closed structures and organise a day-care group for the children of working mothers in a housing estate almost exclusively inhabited by nuclear families with small children. In the latter case, the woman stated that this experience was the trigger for her to become active in the planning of a multi-generational communal house.

Experiences of permeability and seclusion of housing may have contributed to these people's aspirations to change their living arrangements. These experiences are probably shared by a great number of Japanese, and they certainly give a clue as to why communal forms of living in later life are chosen. In a few cases individual housing situations revealed unconventional definitions of home. The most extreme case of my sample is Mrs. N. (mid-50s, divorced). The house, where she spent her childhood, was located in a public park, which she considered as her private playground. The family's textile production business was carried out in the centre room of the house, which changed into the living room in the evenings, and after marriage she and her family lived for some years in two flats on two different floors of a house that was primarily used as an office building connected only by a staircase outside the flats.

## **2.2 Change of family role**

Apart from the above mentioned ways of housing in the earlier life stages of these elderly people, events in their later lives (including the ageing process itself) have played a role for them in changing their housing situation and therefore cannot be ignored. Choosing a communal housing type of residence was closely connected with family matters for the people in my sample. Divorce or the death of a spouse were decisive life events. The role of the children or other relatives, formerly being the main care givers, was often questioned. Some of the elderly chose a communal house as their "final place of living". If not absolutely necessary, they do not intend to move again. For them, the communal house replaces other, more traditional forms of living and, if needed, care arrangements. Old people's homes or senior residences were usually not even mentioned as a possible alternative. Not living with one's family was a consciously made decision by most of the interviewees, although in most cases they themselves had experienced living with their own grandparents when they were younger and in some cases it had been a matter of course to be responsible for the care of one's own parents. One woman (Mrs. J., 72, widowed) reported that she had spent a considerable amount of her life nursing relatives, including her parents, but did not expect her daughters to do the same for her. Moving into her daughters' neighbourhood was the physically closest she thought to be acceptable for them, before she found the communal house with the help of one daughter. In her case, however, traditional thinking of daughters' marrying into other families and, therefore, not being available for their

parents anymore, seems to have played a role, although their relationship appeared to be close.

Another interviewee (Mrs. I., 64, widowed) was asked by her older sister to live in the same multiple dwelling, where she was staying as an interim solution while looking for something else, when she incidentally heard about a new collective house.

...my sister said 'move in'. But that is not so good. [...] My younger sister died two years ago, so only I and my sister were left. My sister said 'we are sisters, and even if we don't get along well, we are still sisters. That's different from living with people you don't know. Isn't it good to live together as sisters?' [...] But I was scolded by her almost every day. For not hanging up the washing in the right way and such things [...] But then I met them [i.e., the persons of the collective housing project] [...] Let's say, they all are adults, or you could say, they have a sense of distance. One can become close friends; I think, these are all people that have the right attitude of non-intrusion. That's why one can become friends. (Mrs. I., 64, widowed)

Living together with one's family does not prevent people from feeling insecure. One interviewee decided to move out of the family's house, because both her son and her daughter-in-law were working and therefore not available during the daytime. Interestingly, it was the daughter-in-law, who protested.

Everybody asks me why I came to live here, although I have a family. But you know, my legs are not so well. And that's very hard, if one cannot move, being alone, on the second floor in such a spacious place. Here, somebody is always present. That's better, I thought. [...] My son and his wife are both working, so they're not at home during the daytime. And also my grandchildren do not come home until late at night. Here, there're friends, and during the daytime, until after 5 o'clock somebody is always here. I feel safer here. [...] My son gave up commenting on my decision, only 'We can't change it. When grandma has made up her mind, she will not listen', but my daughter-in-law does not want people to think that I moved out because we didn't get along well. (Mrs. H., mid-70s, widowed)

Mrs. H. challenged traditional thinking concerning family and the care for the elderly. She herself was aware of the trouble she caused, but, nevertheless, followed her own ideas. Obviously, she has sufficient financial means and the assertiveness to get her own way within the family. As this example as well as others show, moving into communal forms of housing was a deliberate decision taken by these older people, a decision that reflects their own preferences concerning their further lives.

Feeling lonely, nevertheless, seems to make people look for alternative living arrangements (cf. Peace and Holland, 2001; p. 8).

Should I live on my own until my death? [...] This was the first time in my life living on my own. [...] I asked myself how I should use the time all for myself, and I didn't feel very comfortable. (Mrs. N., mid-50s, divorced)

Not being used to living alone was an obvious reason for Mrs. N. to move into a communal housing facility, where the co-residents function as substitutes for family members. It may be due to my small sample, but it seems that it is not especially people who have never married, who are likely to live in single households and probably used to living alone, but that it is widowed and divorced people that seek new living arrangements. This is in accordance with previous research (Holland, 2001; p. 77; Chen *et al.*, 2008) stating that changing one's lifestyle was a strategy for coping with life events. For some of the people interviewed the death of the spouse or a divorce was such a life event and that made them seek a new form of living.

### 3. Discussion

Communal housing is often discussed – not just in Japan – as a solution to cope with an ageing population. It can be characterised as a means of citizens' self-help as by the gerontologist Carol Schreter (1986; p. 136) with regard to shared housing in the United States. In Japan, too, the development of new forms of living may be a reaction to an insufficient choice of housing: Nursing homes and old people's homes do not meet the wishes of older people, especially those with the desire to grow old in their own homes. Commercial forms of housing for the elderly such as assisted living are rare and expensive. Older citizens are not welcome in the mainstream rental market: house owners often reject elderly people for fear that they might cause a fire, not pay the rent or die unnoticed. Only since 1980 have single elderly people been entitled to be considered for public housing; in addition, special services for the elderly have been provided since 1987, albeit in a small number of houses (Ōumi, 2002; pp. 167–169). Other policies to improve the physical infrastructure of neighbourhoods and houses do not sufficiently meet the current preferences and needs of older people (Mine, 2008; pp. 46, 71–73). My informants did not mention special housing for the elderly as a possible alternative. This does not mean that these housing solutions could not have been a choice at all, if only they were more common and financially more affordable. Despite the fact that the interviewees chose communal housing projects that charge higher rents than ordinary single-person flats, they opted for a communal form of living and sold their owned house or flat in a number of cases. Only one person had actively been looking on the mainstream housing market before deciding for communal living.

In the discourse on communal living in Japan, reference is often made to the urban tenement houses (*nagaya*) of the past, especially those of the pre-war era. They are associated with neighbourly cooperation (see e.g. Hayakawa and GL Netto, 2000: pp. 10–13). The nostalgia for the less anonymous living conditions of the *nagaya*, which were, in fact, inhabited by the lower middle and lower classes, does seldom rely on individual experience. Nevertheless, one can assume that the term *nagaya* stands for a neighbourly interaction that was more common in the childhood of the people interviewed as well as the people involved in the discourse of communal living. It can also be argued that the children experienced the lack of privacy differently from their parents, which may have led to a more positive perception of the *nagaya* way of living on the part of the older generations. In fact, my interviewees, if they lived in less favourable housing conditions, perceived the living situation as normal and sometimes mentioned that they had enjoyed it. A

similar observation was made in communal housing in Germany, where the cramped living conditions that some of the residents experienced as children especially as refugees in the wake of the Second World War were also associated with positive memories (Hieber *et al.*, 2005; pp. 89).

Most of the informants' adult family life resembled – at least at first sight – that of an average Japanese post-war family. Yet, a closer look at their housing histories revealed a number of factors that may have been responsible for choosing communal housing. Unlike younger generations, which usually experienced a nuclear family and a decreasing closeness to extended family members and neighbours, the generations of my sample had been used to relatively “permeable” houses in their childhood and frequent interaction with neighbours. In their later lives, most of them lived in ordinary housing as nuclear families. As almost all of them are now widowed or divorced, communal living seems to be a good solution to loneliness and isolation, as well as a way of not having to rely on family members while at the same time having enough private space.

It has often been argued that families were not “available” any longer, because of the smaller number of children and the increased employment of women – i.e., the traditional caregivers – and therefore new concepts of housing and care for the elderly were needed (Ochiai, 1996; Long, 2001; pp. 201–206;). In most of the cases in my sample, however, family members – i.e., siblings or children – exist who are willing or even wished to live with or close to the older people I interviewed. In these cases the alternative housing, therefore, replaces the family, *although* the family still functions. It was their new approach to living that made these older people choose an alternative form of housing. Unlike earlier generations and a considerable portion of their own generation, they did not expect their children to take care of them. According to research by Izuhara (2006, 2009), Nakano (2005) and others, elderly people in Japan increasingly decide to live on their own rather than with family members. Not wanting to be a burden on their children is one of the reasons why elderly people take this decision, another is the wish for an independent life. Support and care have shifted from the family to non-relatives, a shift that challenges the still prevailing ideal of “family care” (Nakano, 2005; p. 154–156). As Nakano's research has shown, a number of people living in single households preferred the support of home helpers to being dependent on family members, not least because services are charged and therefore do not result in any obligations for the person being cared for. The situation in communal housing for elderly people, in which volunteer staff and the organising NPO play an important role, is similar. But communal housing (including multi-generational housing) – because it requires the cooperation of others – has a different quality. A well-balanced mix of privacy on the one hand, and communality on the other, seemed to be one of the determining factors for choosing communal housing.

#### **4. Conclusion**

Elderly people's lives are often associated with dependence on others. But the elderly are not only a diverse group in terms of their ages and health conditions (Peace and Holland, 2001; p. 4), they also differ considerably with regard to their living arrangements and housing. The above mentioned examples – admittedly still a very small number – show that older people are open to seeking new forms of living, and that they are even being active in forming new ways of living. Even if help or care is required, determining

where and how one wants to live was important for the people I interviewed. Deviating from traditional patterns of housing of the elderly does not cause a problem for them – but it does, sometimes, for their relatives.

The personal experiences of housing situations of the people I interviewed are certainly influenced by the social and cultural realities of a given time and shared by the specific age groups to which they belong (Höpflinger, 2004). These experiences seem to be *not unimportant for deciding* to move into an alternative form of housing, but this still needs further investigation. More obvious reasons that could be observed were recent life events or the fear of not being able to live independently anymore. These reasons probably were *the most decisive* when opting for a new living arrangement, but they do not really explain *why communal housing* was chosen. The exploration of housing histories (including the specific living arrangements), therefore, deserves further attention.

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