
Left Behind: Global(Urban)ization and Socio-Spatial Landscapes of Decay in Akita, Japan

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Abstract

We are living in an urban era. More than half of the world's population now lives in cities, characterized by globalized markets flowing in a rush of competition for power, influence and resources. In the shadows of this urban intensification, remain those left on the margins. In the context of Japan, one of the most urbanized countries in the world, the struggle to maintain economic power on the international stage has led to demographic and physical decline for much of the country. With a declining population and a "super-aging society," these challenges translate to a landscape of decay outside of the Tokyo megalopolis and other urban agglomerations of the Tokaido region. Vacant buildings pepper the landscape with their overgrown and ominous presence, reminding passersby of times long gone. This photo essay/poster explores the socio-political landscape of depopulating Akita Prefecture in northern Japan. With the oldest average age, the highest suicide rate and a shrinking population, the social, spatial and visual landscape in Akita presents a stark contrast to the bustling Tokyo megalopolis. This unmitigated "de-development" of peripheral regions produces palpable impacts on systems of democratic governance, such as *chonaikai* (neighborhood associations) and *machizukuri* (community-based participatory planning). Land use shifts create further tensions and decay of longstanding social systems. This transitioning landscape holds representations of political power on the local level that impact sense of place and experiences of everyday life. Understanding these shifts has implications for Japan and abroad, as many countries are on the precipice of a similar fate.

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