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## Living alone together in Tokyo *share houses*

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### ABSTRACT

In the context of mounting housing market pressures and an international swell in the formation of non-family households, especially among younger-adults, this paper examines *share house* (*shea-hausu*), an increasingly popular form of shared private rental housing in Tokyo. We frame our study in relation to shifting socioeconomic and demographic conditions affecting single, young Japanese adults, their aspirations and life-courses, as well as forms and practices in Japanese housing. We elaborate on the way *shea-hausu* are provided, and discuss three sets of techniques that together configure *shea-hausu* as a product distinct from other forms of renting, but also re-script sharing as a particular kind of ‘desirable living’ among single young adults. Furthermore, we show how *shea-hausu* both enables the pursuit of new experiences of ‘home’ and further entrenches traditionalist views of the needs and wants of solo dwellers.

### Vivre seuls ensemble dans les logements partagés de Tokyo

#### RÉSUMÉ

Dans un contexte comprenant les pressions croissantes dans le marché immobilier et l’augmentation globale des ménages non familiaux, surtout chez les jeunes adultes, cette communication étudie les *shea-hausu* (logements partagés), une forme de colocation privée de plus en plus populaire à Tokyo. Nous construisons cette étude par rapport aux conditions socio-économiques et démographiques changeantes qui affectent non seulement les jeunes adultes célibataires au Japon, leurs aspirations et leurs vies, mais aussi les formes et pratiques du logement au Japon. Nous expliquons les manières dont les *shea-hausu* sont offerts, et présentons trois méthodes qui, combinées, en font un produit différent d’autres types de location, mais aussi réinventent la colocation comme un genre particulier de « vie désirable » pour les jeunes adultes célibataires. En outre, nous démontrons la manière dont les *shea-hausu* permettent à la fois la recherche de nouvelles expériences de « foyer » et le renforcement des vues traditionnelles sur les besoins et les aspirations des citadins célibataires.

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mercantilización.

## Viviendo solos juntos en las viviendas compartidas de Tokio

### RESUMEN

En el contexto de las crecientes presiones del mercado de la vivienda y de una expansión internacional en la formación de hogares no familiares, especialmente entre los adultos más jóvenes, este artículo examina la vivienda compartida (*shea-hausu*), una forma cada vez más popular de vivienda privada de alquiler compartido en Tokio. Enmarcamos nuestro estudio en relación con las cambiantes condiciones socioeconómicas y demográficas que afectan a los jóvenes japoneses solteros, sus aspiraciones y cursos de vida, así como las formas y prácticas en la vivienda japonesa. Desarrollamos la forma en que se provee *shea-hausu*, y discutimos tres conjuntos de técnicas que juntas configuran *shea-hausu* como un producto distinto de otras formas de alquiler, pero que también reescriben el compartir como un tipo particular de 'vida deseable' entre solteros adultos jóvenes. Además, mostramos cómo *shea-hausu* permite la búsqueda de nuevas experiencias de 'hogar' y afianza aún más los puntos de vista tradicionalistas de las necesidades y deseos de habitantes solos.

## Introduction

While the number of one-person-households has been increasing since the 1970s, a more recent trend in advanced economies has been the growing number of singles *living alone together*, in shared accommodation. Privately rented shared housing, typically comprised of young singles privately renting rooms in properties with common facilities, have boomed internationally (see Arundel & Ronald, 2016; Maalsen, 2019; Heath et al., 2017). These developments mark longer transitional periods during early-adulthood and are associated with the intensified individualization of urban living (Klinenberg, 2012). Labour market flexibilization and diminishing housing affordability, have strengthened this trend (Hoolachan et al., 2017). Japan has been no exception with the economically precarious younger population showing a fading propensity towards family-household formation (see Allison, 2014; Brinton, 2011; Yamada, 2005). More unusual in the Japanese case has been the social, cultural and urban conditions in which new technologies of shared living have been molded.

Communal living has a long history in Japan. Nonetheless, households including both extended families and unrelated kin were progressively dismantled in the post-war period with male-breadwinner nuclear families becoming dominant (see Ochiai, 1994; Sand, 2003; Ueno, 1994). Public policy and industrial employment practices played key roles in this process, and an emerging urban housing market featuring condominiums and detached family houses helped align life-trajectories along a standardized housing ladder (Hiramaya, 2013). Following periodic economic stagnation since the late-1980s, however, Japan has entered a 'post-growth' era, with life-courses featuring secure work, marriage and home ownership in decline. The onset of household fragmentation in Japan has been very rapid and particularly urban. The proportion of people living alone in Tokyo, for

example, expanded from around one-in-three to almost half of all households between 1985 and 2015 (Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications [MIAC], 2018). Traditionally, a large-stock of mostly low-quality, small and utilitarian private rental dwellings supported the transient period of young people (mostly men) living alone in Japanese cities (Ronald et al., 2018).

However, in the early-2000s a new form of sharing, *shea-hausu*, appeared, initially in Tokyo and later in other metropolises, re-introducing communal living (*kōkyō jūtaku*), this time as an aspirational form of living for urban singles. The sector ostensibly caters to a demand for better quality homes, a social life outside work, and a desire for integrated live/work/play lifestyles among young urbanites. Given rather resilient cultural norms connecting home and family in Japan (Ronald & Alexy, 2017) shared housing has taken more than a decade to take root, requiring considerable stimulation by real estate interests and market intermediaries in reimagining the home and shared tenures. Thus, the development of this housing type has been almost entirely *supply-side, developer-driven*. A Japanese *shea-hausu* is a highly commodified form of individualized communal living consisting of minimally furnished private sleeping rooms and a separate set of common facilities: kitchens, bathrooms, showers and toilets, living-dining areas. Many properties in Tokyo include extra-attractions such as multimedia rooms, gyms, roof-top gardens, climbing walls. Contracts are individual, and typically short-term, with residents paying minimal starting costs (see Jung & Kobayashi, 2008). *Shea-hausu* differs from typical shared housing, or flatting (Clark et al., 2017), in the level of professionalization of service providers, the type of rental agreements, amenities provided, and lifestyle branding.

In this paper we examine the rise of *shea-hausu* and how it has been brought to market, building primarily on *the perspective of providers*. The following questions drive the research: How are shared life-styles imagined and materialized in Tokyo's *shea-hausu* sector? How are specific meanings and practices of home 'built into' this housing type? The paper picks-up and addresses Maalsen's (2020) call to explore new geographies of home as 'rented, shared and digitalized' by examining micro-scale practices of sharing, their place within the urban rental market, and the role of different technologies in shaping the appeal of shared life-styles, and the trustworthiness of this emerging housing sub-sector. We connect our analysis to broader debates on the commodification and financialization of housing (Aalbers, 2016), by reflecting on the phenomenon of *shea-hausu* in Japan in the context of a global rise in commodified shared housing, or co-living (see also Bergan and Gorman Murray, this issue). The case of Japan is particularly salient to current debates on commodification and 'disruptive' housing technologies (e.g. Pettit et al., 2018) to the extent that resistance to non-family household formation has only recently begun to fade (Raymo et al., 2009). The rise of shared housing has thus been unexpected, requiring commercial actors engaged in profit yielding activities in the housing market to deploy new techniques aimed at redefining the meanings and practices of home.

The following analysis begins by addressing salient socioeconomic shifts over the last two decades that have helped transform individual expectations of, and aspirations toward, the home. We go on to specifically consider the emerging young, single population in urban Japan, as well as housing system changes that enabled the development of *shea-hausu*. From there we empirically engage with three illustrative examples of *shea-*

*hausu* in Tokyo, identifying three sets of techniques through which *shea-hausu* is brought to market: (1) techniques for shaping the 'ideal sharer'; (2) techniques for creating new spatial configurations and ideals of home; (3) techniques for reassembling housing market actors and instruments. In our discussion we reflect on the place of shared living in the Japanese urban context and the life-courses of young urbanites. We consider changing geographies and meanings of home enacted through *shea-hausu* as a particular variety of commodified shared living, as well as how it intersects with features of late capitalism like branding and the selling of experience over objects.

### **Sharing, sharers, and the home**

Shared rental accommodation in most developed societies has been viewed as a form of short-term, cheaper accommodation, usually catering to the needs of single-adults on limited incomes. Sharing is generally associated with the period of transition between the parental home and independent housing (Heath and Cleaver, 2016). However, demand for rental accommodation has intensified in recent decades, given waning expectations of family formation and decreasing access to home ownership (McKee, 2012). Volumes of young-adults entering the private rental housing sector have thus augmented across most advanced economies (Forrest & Yip, 2013; Lennartz et al., 2016). In some cases, this has been identified as a shared generational condition further associated with diminishing access to stable employment and limited access to credit (Hoolachan et al., 2017). Nonetheless, this 'generation rent' may be best considered 'generation share' (Maalsen, 2020), in that private renting among younger adults has increasingly taken the form of shared housing. Scholars have even suggested that sharing is becoming a staple form of housing for urban singles of all ages, regardless of income (Heath et al., 2017).

Critical to this shift have been improvements in financial and digital technologies facilitating sharing activities (Parkinson, this issue). While much has been made of the 'sharing economy' (see Richardson, 2015), in the case of shared housing, property investment and on-line matching platforms, have largely sought to enhance rent-seeking practices (Fields, 2018; Rogers, 2016). Large cities in Europe, North America and Australasia, for example, have been particularly susceptible to new digitalized economies of real estate, which have severely disrupted the balance between different submarkets and tenures (see Pettit et al., 2018). The impact of short-term lettings in these cities (i.e. Airbnb) on housing access and affordability has been a particular research focus (e.g. Gurran & Phibbs, 2017; Jiao & Wegmann, 2017). Thus, the recent expansion of shared rental tenancies can also be understood in terms of technological shifts characteristic of neo-liberalization, and the accompanying financialization of housing (Aalbers, 2016).

Furthermore, sharing marks the continued diffusion of homemaking practices that blur the distinction between domestic and public space, as captured in home-city geographies (Blunt & Sheringham, 2019). These features are particularly important in the Japanese context where the strict distinction between *uchi* (domestic, inside) and *soto* (public, outside), though contested, has been at the center of discourses of home and belonging (Ronald & Hirayama, 2009). Thus, the appearance of semi-public spaces in the context of *shea-hausu* can be associated with the dissolution of strict cultural norms (Kubota, 2009), but also with a shift in how domestic identities and materialities are being constructed (Meagher, 2017). Extant research into the experiences of sharing in different contexts,

notably the UK and other English speaking countries, has illustrated the means by which co-residents typically negotiate relationships (Clark et al., 2017; Hilder et al., 2018) and form identities that help normalize shared housing, establishing feelings of, and attachment to, 'home' (Gorman-Murray, 2015; McNamara & Connell, 2007). Although limited, this literature has begun to point to the growing impact of shared living on how young people imagine and engage with life-course and household transitions in a more flexible (unstable) neo-liberal (volatile) economy (Heath et al., 2017). The transitory nature of shared accommodation has challenged theoretical understandings of homemaking as a gradual, long-term process, confronting notions of home as stable with the insecurity and flexibility of short tenancies, and the serendipity of casual encounters at home (Holton & Riley, 2016; Valentine, 2001).

### ***Singles and housing in Japan***

The rise of singles in Japan has manifested later and, has been particularly intense compared to other advanced economies. Households featuring couples and their children fell from 42.1 to 27.9 percent of all households between 1980 and 2010 (Japan Bureau of Statistics). In Tokyo, family households had decreased to 23 percent by 2015, while one person households reached 47 percent (Tokyo Statistical Yearbook). Through the 1990s and 2000s, the boom in solo living was largely driven by increases in urbanites aged under-40 living alone, who have demonstrated a diminishing propensity for coupling, marriage and child bearing (Ronald, 2017).

The challenges faced by Japan's younger cohorts have been well documented (see Allison 2014; Brinton, 2011; Yamada, 2005). Since the bursting of the bubble-economy 30 years-ago, poorer employment opportunities have severely undermined routes into and through standard family life-courses. This created deep divisions in experiences and expectations of marriage, family and home-making within and between generations in Japan (Druta & Ronald, 2018). The housing market has reinforced social fragmentation. Until the 1990s housing production focused on housing for family households and transitions up a 'housing ladder' (Hirayama, 2006). Since then however, the construction sector has produced high volumes of super-compact units for lone-dwellers: apartments sized 20–29 m<sup>2</sup> now constitute around 40 percent of rental housing in large cities (Ronald, 2017). The housing stock is thus also largely bifurcated between owner-occupied family dwellings and compact units designed for one person living alone (see Hirayama & Ronald, 2006).

The development of Japan's modern housing sector has strongly mirrored gender, family and household norms. Postwar housing policy promoted standard male-breadwinner family households through its main pillar, the Government Housing Loan Corporation (GHLC), which provided access to low-interest, long-term mortgages. This instrument also discriminated strongly against singles. Until the 1970s, GHLC loans were not available to apartment buyers, and until 1987 were not open to unmarried people or other kinds of one-person households. Public rental housing similarly targeted family households, with only low-income, elderly people qualifying for single occupancy. Company housing, which made up as much as 7 percent of housing in 1963 (and much higher in cities where it often included dormitory housing), was the main housing option

for working singles, but was sold-off *en masse* after the economic bubble burst in 1990 (Sato, 2007).

Critically, housing policy interventions have given way to a more liberalized housing regime since the turn of the century, with the state looking more to the market to provide solutions to urban housing demand. In major cities, the private rental sector has become the main means by which single people house themselves. Among single households aged under-35, 88 percent live in private rented accommodation in Tokyo (Tokyo Metropolitan Government, 2018). The advent of construction sector reforms that emphasize renovation and remodeling (*rifōmu*) over the traditional scrap-and-rebuild (Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism [MLIT], 2017a), have prompted renewed interest in renovating old public and company housing, but also former single family housing, into private rental units, including shared accommodation (MLIT, 2017b).

## Study design

Research into innovative models of private rental market sharing, such as co-living (Bergan & Gorman Murray, this issue), of which *shea-hausu* is a variety, is scarce across the social scientific literature. For that reason, we chose an inductive approach in our research, aiming to give theoretical and empirical insight into this phenomenon. Given our stated purpose of understanding the relationship between shifting life-courses and ideals of home and the development of the *shea-hausu* market sub-sector, we conducted an exploratory case study (Yin, 2004) of the best developed market for *shea-hausu* in Japan, that of Tokyo.

Primary data was collected through several site visits to Tokyo, conducted between 2014 and 2016, with the main fieldwork taking place in the autumn of 2016. We collected several types of data, interviews with providers and residents, observations, photos, and promotional materials, each helping to reveal different aspects of the whole. Interviews with providers and marketers were conducted to gauge the development of the sector, and the vision as well as specific ‘tools’ that the operators used to bring their developments to the market. Interviews with residents centered on their life-course, the place of *shea-hausu* in their housing careers, and the daily practices of sharing. All interviews were transcribed in the original language and analyzed thematically. Observations, photos and promotional materials were collected during extensive guided visits to specific *shea-hausu* developments, to document the spatial set-up, design and material culture of these homes. All primary data was analyzed using a content analysis framework (Ritchie et al., 2013). Secondary data from government and industry commissioned surveys, policy documents as well as web-content (including interviews and testimonials with *shea-hausu* residents, blogs and news articles, design magazines features) were collected during the spring of 2017 and mined for relevant contextual information.

## Share house and the market for sharing in Tokyo

Industry statistics suggest that there are currently between 20,000 and 25,000 rooms in *shea-hausu* in Tokyo, up from just a few hundred twenty years ago (Hitsuji Fudosan, 2013; Meagher, 2017). *Shea-hausu* thus remains a niche market, despite growing popularity and visibility in the media. Notwithstanding its size, the sector is highly segmented, with an

important tranche catering to young professionals with high aspirations and fewer financial means. Here many providers try to maximize their profits. However, despite the hype surrounding shared life-styles, other tranches are more exploitative of the precarious position of young singles on the housing market. Indeed, some *shea-hausu* are akin to dormitories, with very small private rooms (often less than 5 m<sup>2</sup>) or multiple-occupancy. Rents in this sub-sector are often below 40,000-yen (350 euros) a month. In terms of development size, a government survey (MLIT, 2013), among a sample of 931 share housing residents, found that nearly 70 percent occupied dwellings with fewer than 10 private rooms, 11 percent lived in houses with 11–20 private rooms and about 2 percent lived in complexes with over 100 private rooms.

Similar formats of sharing have been appearing in countries around the world under the banner of co-living (Bergan & Gorman Murray, this issue). However, the Japanese market is comparatively closed, with international investors and start-ups becoming active only after 2018 (Canvas 8, 2019). The difference between *shea-hausu* and other forms of shared living rests on the associated level of professional services and quality. *Shea-hausu* generally offer services including cleaning and repairs, and ensure increased security of the premises. Larger providers often brand their developments in terms of design ideas as well as target life-styles. ‘Social Residences’ (Oakhouse, 2019), for example, constitute a sub-sector of purpose-built community *shea-hausu* for people who want to share hobbies and activities in a community. Many other formats provide facilities that appeal to people with common life-goals, such as starting a business or learning English, or to people with a shared life-style need, such as keeping a pet or raising a child as a single parent (E’s Future Co-creative Forum, 2014).

While experimental commercial sharing began earlier, the market in Tokyo started to take-off after 2006, and grew exponentially since then. A survey conducted in 2018 among 752 share house providers, found that 60 percent had started in the last 5 years, with profit from the sector increasing nearly 40 percent in a two year period (Tokyo Shoko Research, 2018). Due to its novelty, the sector advanced without clear regulations, especially regarding building standards and pricing. 2013 marked a moment of recognition among policy makers and administrators that the *shea-hausu* market is growing, followed by immediate concerns over ‘illegal houses’ (*dappou hausu*) and fire safety. The small size and intense occupation of the buildings made *shea-hausu* more susceptible to fire and provided an evacuation risk in case of natural disasters. Thus, new regulations were imposed mandating that all *shea-hausu* be treated as ‘dormitories’ in planning documents, and that they implement fire safety measures (MLIT, 2014). Despite an initial knee-jerk regulatory response, the view of *shea-hausu* has arguably become more balanced, and many have featured in architectural magazines and TV programs. *Shea-hausu* have, moreover, been at the forefront of a growing trend toward more sustainable renovation and repurposing (Japan Share House Association, 2018). The national government has recognized the potential of *shea-hausu* in tackling high vacancy and improving unused buildings (MLIT, 2017b). The narrative of renovation and innovation has also played a role in how the market for *shea-hausu* has been sold and how users understand sharing, in many cases, as both an aesthetic and life-style choice. In what follows we present three exemplary types of *shea-hausu* that illustrate different visions, and combinations of actors working together. All names and details of the cases have been changed to protect the privacy of informants.



### **'Modern house 20 (MH20)'**

MH20 opened in the beginning of 2016 and consists of seven standard and one small room in a single-family house, originally built in the 1920s. The developer is a small company that operates 6 other similarly sized houses. They have a uniform branding formula for their properties, and usually re-use traditional Japanese wooden frame houses to create 'modern yet quaint' *shea-hausu*, each with a distinct décor. MH20 boasts a common kitchen with traditional wooden shelves matched with a counter and high chairs, and a living room where a large flat screen TV sits in the traditional house alcove (*tokonoma*). The private rooms are small (10–12 m<sup>2</sup>) but functional, with a personal sink, wardrobe space, and a few plain furniture items such as a single bed and writing table. Design elements characteristic of the Japanese vernacular are present in the rooms, further enhancing the style of the house.

MH20 is located in a residential neighbourhood with easy access to one of Tokyo's central hubs. According to the developer, it is highly profitable and was fully-occupied. Redeveloping the house required minimal changes to the building structure, even when creating the open, living-dining area. Other renovations tackled interior decor, including new wooden floors and repairs to plywood walls, bathroom tiling, new doors and windows and garden work. The developer sees houses with historical value, large enough to allow more than five private rooms, and located in accessible and desirable Tokyo neighborhoods as easy to 'save' by conversion to *shea-hausu*. There is enough demand for housing in Tokyo and, especially among young singles, there is a 'nostalgic yearning' (*akogare*) for the authentic life-style which these houses provide. A room in MH20 costs 70,000 yen a month (~ 600 euros), including utilities, cheaper than a studio apartment<sup>1</sup> in central Tokyo, priced between 80,000 and 110,000 yen (chintai.net, 2019). A small deposit, less than the equivalent of month's rent, is required upon signing the contract. The developer reported that residents were on average aged 29–30, of mixed gender and usually professionally employed. There is a basic screening procedure for potential residents, including a face-to-face interview at the house. Asked what they look for in new residents the manager responded:

We make sure that they have basic social skills. We check that they take-off their shoes at the entrance, also how they sit and how they walk. Since it is an old house with thin walls and floors, it's important that people living here walk softly and not stomp their feet.

According to one of MH20's residents we interviewed, social relations in the house are not close, but are polite and cordial. There are rules for using the common facilities written on post-its, in the kitchen, bathroom, toilet and washing machine area. Management cleans once per-week, so a modicum of resident care is needed. The residents usually meet in the evening or morning, when waiting for the shared bathroom, and exchange a few words. But otherwise they keep to themselves, they do not organize events together, nor go out as a group.

### **Electric house (EH)**

EH opened in 2011 in a central Tokyo location, popular among young people, and offers a mixed use concept with shopping (primarily a café) on the ground floor and offices on

the second. 64 private rooms are provided on the next three floors along with common areas on the top floor and a roof-top garden. It is a large building, formerly a dormitory for employees of a conglomerate. The developer is a subsidiary of said conglomerate, dealing in rental property management. EH was re-developed as an in-house project, with the 'mother company' transferring the property to the subsidiary, which took control of all remaining phases of the project. Extensive renovations were undertaken, both to the exterior and the interior of the building. The ground floor shopping essentially opened the building to the street. Meanwhile, the top-floor common areas were redeveloped following an open-plan concept. The rooms were refitted with air-conditioning, auto-lock doors and new sinks. However, the original layout was not modified. Common facilities include a kitchen, dining room, relaxation room with stocked bookshelves and a large hammock in the center, and a separate multimedia room. The kitchen is outfitted with latest appliances and each resident has a separate supply box and fridge space for cooking ingredients and personal items. The dining area is also open the office spaces users during the day, although common areas are primarily used by residents.

A room in EH costs just over 90,000 yen (750 euros), and similar with MH20, requires a one-month deposit on signing the contract. Residents' average age is between 30 and 32, and all claim to be employed. A screening process is applied when renting to a new person, including an income check and a face-to-face interview. Usually, as long as the income check is favorable, and the person does not appear to be socially problematic, all applicants are accepted.

Throughout the common spaces are small signs of shared living including a picture wall where residents post photos of themselves, and a blackboard where residents leave announcements, small messages and event invitations. The kitchen is plastered with the usual warning messages about dirty-dishes. However, similar to other larger-scale *shea-hausu*, there is a cleaning company that takes care of all common facilities. It is customary for residents to leave cooked dishes on the kitchen counter to be shared, although common meals are unusual. The developer maintains the atmosphere of the house by organizing two events every year, to which residents are invited. Still, the operator does not interfere further in the daily life of residents, except to solve maintenance problems.

We do not 'control' the community that might develop, but we provide the space for community to appear. We try to create a place where people are happy to come back (*okaeri ga dekiru*). Residents were the ones who put up pictures on this wall to introduce themselves. [...] This rule book (in the kitchen) is also something people did.

### **'The Office'**

The Office was completed in the second-half of 2016, and is a medium sized shared house (20 rooms) located on the edge of a central Tokyo residential neighbourhood. The building's owner approached a real estate developer specializing in design apartments (*dezain manshon*) with the wish to demolish and rebuild an old office building. The developer, however, convinced the owner it was not a good time to build anew. Instead, they leased the building from the owner for a period of 10 years, repurposed it as *shea-hausu* and are currently attempting to manage it.

We usually develop design apartments, so we used that expertise to make this *shea-hausu*. It's our first. Each floor has a design concept. All the facilities have design furniture. Since it's a *shea-hausu*, you use a lot of things in common so they have to be of better quality, we thought.

The Office abounds in design features meant to inspire a cool, yet comfortable, life-style. The common area of the building is in the basement and consists of a living-dining room, a separate kitchen, and a stylish bathroom area. The living room is divided into separate parts featuring several large flat-screen TVs. There are leather sofas and chairs, but also a Japanese *tatami*-floor area. The kitchen is styled with latest appliances with an industrial design, including induction stove-tops, stylish coffee machines, and two-door refrigerators. Each of the two sleeping floors has a different design theme. There are no sinks in the rooms, but the residents may have their own fridge and TV if they chose. Due to the irregular shape of the building, rooms vary significantly in size and aspect. For this reason they are also differently priced, between 73,000 and 95,000 (approximately 600–800 euros).

Being a new *shea-hausu*, The Office was not fully occupied, and the common areas were pristine. The project manager indicated that residents are on average approaching their mid-30 s and are primarily women. The developer is new to operating a *shea-hausu* and there were elements of management they still seemed to grapple with. They also had no clear vision on the character of the house, despite the attention given to design. They had not yet organized a 'launch event' though they were considering organizing one after all the rooms had been leased. As a design apartment developer, they were used to a different style of rental property management. The project manager seemed genuinely surprised by the outcome:

All my colleagues are asking me when are you going to be done with this project and I cannot say. You seem to be constantly standing in the daily lives (*nichijo seikatsu no mannaka ni tatsu*) of the people you are renting to. I come here quite often ... to think about events and creating a community. [...] But also, people have a lot of expectations, and they call all the time about maintenance issues. The other day someone called about a cockroach, as if this is something you call your landlord about if it were a regular rental apartment!

## Commoditizing and marketing single life-styles

In an interview with a *shea-hausu* industry leader, the young, energetic CEO described *shea-hausu* as '*gijutsu*' – a new 'technology' of housing. Indeed, up until the late-1990s, just one or two percent of people in their twenties ever experienced sharing a home platonically with a non-family member (Kawata, 2007), resulting in the proliferation of singles living either alone or alongside other kin. In this section we argue that the development of *shea-hausu* and its rise to popularity has depended upon a set of techniques for commoditizing and marketing alternative single life-styles. These techniques provide insights into how new housing products in the Japanese context are disrupting various aspects of the housing system, starting with the micro-scale of home space and everyday home practices, and onto development practices, landlord-tenant relationships, and patterns of urbanization.

### ***Imagining and shaping the single sharer: media branding, tenant screening, and design***

The first set of techniques contributes to imagining and shaping of the *shea-hausu* single dweller. Reinventing sharing with strangers in the Japanese context has required considerable re-branding of *shea-hausu* as a desirable form of accommodation for the average young, Japanese urbanite. Through TV shows, books, magazine articles, but also a wealth of web-based content, *shea-hausu* has been presented as a safe, stylish, and cool way of living. Every *shea-hausu* provider makes efforts to present testimonials and interviews with tenants as early as possible. A cottage industry of lifestyle books and pamphlets, magazine features and blogs dispel potential fears of living with strangers, at the same time, extolling the virtues of community and sociability (e.g. Kubota, 2009). Media about *shea-hausu* rarely focus on the actual housing units provided. Instead, by focusing on lifestyle and community, emphasize the potential for self-actualization through the pursuit of sharing (Zwick & Ozalp, 2011). Following a hobby or passion, living in a kind of environment that one could not otherwise access, but also the financial advantages of living in shared accommodation are common tropes that gear potential residents toward a home life-style of experimentation.

If (re)branding ensures that residents are steered toward sharing, screening processes put in place by developers ensure that the 'right kind' of people inhabit certain properties. For example, a small share house like MH20 may be open specifically to quieter residents, whose presence will not disturb the harmony of the neighbourhood. Meanwhile, more outgoing potential residents may be steered toward larger properties, in more mixed use areas. There are also certain kinds of dwellers deemed unsuited to share, and operators try to weed them out when screening new residents. Anti-social behaviour is among the most commonly cited reason for distrust of, or dissatisfaction with *shea-hausu* (MLIT, 2013b). Such behaviour may range from mild social-awkwardness to cases of harassment.

The typical profile of a sharer is young, professional, and more often than not female. The average age of sharers has been increasing since the early-2000s, from just over 26 to closer to 30, and operators anticipate the age will continue to increase. Despite an association between shared living and labour precariousness, the majority of sharers seem gainfully employed (either permanent employees – *seishain* – or dispatch employees – *hakenshain*) (MLIT, 2018). Students, part-timers, or freelancers are less well represented among sharers, partially due to income checks. Women are over-represented among *shea-hausu* residents (MLIT, 2017b) with a significant number of *shea-hausu* catering exclusively to women or having women-only floors (see example of EH).

Finally, providers of *shea-hausu* essentially mold 'the sharer' through the intentional design of space. The examples of *shea-hausu* provided above point to the sharer as a person with little need for personal space, or space to store personal belongings. Instead s(he) has a minimalist approach to homemaking, owning just enough personal possessions to store on a few shelves. This characteristic is built into the design of private rooms offering only the most basic of personal storage space. The sharer is also an individual whose personal needs and desire for home must adapt to the daily patterns of others, who are and will remain, primarily, strangers. Though sociability is a much advertised characteristic of *shea-hausu* this is not the kind of togetherness envisioned in more communal sharing formats (Heath, this issue). Instead encounters and relationships

are envisioned as necessarily serendipitous. In this sense, the common spaces of share houses are designed to be used but also to function as quasi-public spaces (Meagher, 2017). Outsider friends and family are not always welcome. Intimate relationships are also not envisioned as belonging to the space of the home. The sharer is eminently single, sleeping in a single bed and not needing to entertain privately in their room.

### ***Fostering new ideals of home though spatial configurations***

The majority of *shea-hausu* rely on a design concept that combines minimal and sometimes even austere *private spaces* with lush and inviting *common spaces*. Though privacy is generally protected by ensuring that each resident has a separate room that can be secured, sometimes with automatic locks, it is also understood that the added value of this type of accommodation is the potential to spend time in common spaces and use common amenities. Building relationships with others is an important upfront benefit and arguably also a motivation for sharing among residents. The appropriate balance between privacy and sharing, however, is something that both providers and users wrestle with, suggesting a continuous reevaluation of the publicness of shared spaces (Meagher, 2017).

Interviews with residents suggest that many sharers do not pursue social engagement beyond cursory interactions with neighbours. And even though they arguably pay to use common facilities, in many cases residents forego interaction. As one resident from a larger *shea-hausu* confessed:

The people that hang out in the common space are always the same, and we know each other. But this is only a small group of people. The majority of people here go straight to their rooms when they enter. We don't even meet in the common bath ...

The preoccupation with selling a 'unique' life-style seems to be common to many *shea-hausu* operators. Though common spaces and facilities are fairly standard, operators seem to aim at creating a brand, a style of life that can be experienced by residents. Whether nostalgic, authentic, modern, 'European', stylish, industrial, cozy, or cute, these different styles of living can be consumed in daily life in a share house and constitute the primary 'products' being marketed and sold. Design features usually provided by famous interior designers and architects, common spaces with character, but also a set schedule of events are the tools by which operators guide the interactions of occupants in a purposeful, unobtrusive way.

Despite the marketing quips, sharing as a privately provided tenure in the Tokyo context is not understood as communal living, in which residents have responsibilities to other people living in the same house. Contrary to idealized notions of sharing as engaged community life, self-managed, intentional living (Czischke & Huisman, 2018; Jarvis, 2017), the model of sharing proposed by *shea-hausu* relies on the operator selecting people to live together, and managing 'the community.' In the absence of sustained community management, sharing becomes about enjoying a way of life alone-but-together with other people who also think that way of life is appealing. Some operators put greater efforts into enabling different groups to form, usually around common interests. However, on average, sharing in the Tokyo context seems to be more about a group of people temporarily consuming the same home living style rather than long term community building. This is further confirmed by reports that the average stay in any

given *shea-hausu* has decreased from one or two years in 2011 to less than a year in 2016 (interview with EH developer).

### ***Reassembling housing market actors and instruments***

The provision of *shea-hausu* in the context of Tokyo relies on a combination of actors including real estate owners, developers, and marketing companies, as well as instruments such as short-leases, small deposits and insurance guarantees. Real estate owners, either individuals or large companies, in possession of unproductive property, provide the basic building blocks for new developments. However, understanding the distinctive practice of *shea-hausu* in Japan, requires a more considered appraisal of the role of market intermediaries (see Bergan and Gorman-Murray, this issue).

*Shea-hausu* operators are the primary actors responsible for bringing a *house* to the market. However, they do not own properties. Instead, they negotiate leasing agreements for a determined period of time (usually 10 years), with owners. Operators tend to limit their role to refurbishing, renting and managing properties. Nearly all operators have consultancy services that target property owners. The lease based relationship between owners and operators signals a particular kind of market, in which temporariness exists not only on the side of renters, but also on the side of landlords. The focus of operators on services and the social calendar of *shea-hausu*, also signals a new role for these providers as builders of engineered 'communities'. While in other co-living examples around the world intermediary landlords/operators generally also act as marketers of properties (Bergan and Gorman-Murray, this issue), this role has been further outsourced in Japan to specialized marketing companies for *shea hausu*.

Marketing companies have been critical actors in the socio-cultural production of *shea-hausu*. As in other contexts (see Fields, 2018; Pettit et al., 2018; Rogers, 2016) such corporations have taken specific advantage of digitalization, with the majority of rental requests handled through online portals rather than by the operator. While most companies list properties on multiple sites, including their own websites, real estate marketers do much more than simply listing vacancies. They offer advice on appropriate pricing, provide the language that makes properties appealing, and field inquiries from potential renters. In addition, they play an important role in setting 'industry standards' and educating both providers and the public about sharing. For example, according to our sources, to be able to list a property on a portal website, a provider needs to prove that they offer minimum standards in terms of the size of the rooms and quality of facilities. Through courses and publications marketing companies may also offer information about how to design common spaces and run attractive *shea-hausu*.

Re-scripting landlord tenant relationships in the context of *shea-hausu* meant redefining contractual terms both in terms of securities and terms of tenure. Introducing the concept of deposit (*depojito*) – usually about 1 month's rent – in place of the traditional *shikikin* (security deposit) and *reikin* ('gratitude money' offered to the landlord) – usually 2–3 months' rent, increased the actual and perceived distance between the owner of properties and their tenants. The typical rental contract for *shea hausu* is shorter (1 year with 1 months' notice) and more flexible than traditional rental contracts (2 years with 3 months' notice) in Japan, signaling the flexibilization of a rather rigid rental market, that despite its residual character did provide considerable security of tenure. Finally,

operators of more than one property also provide membership schemes, by which residents can move from one place to another within the range of developments provided by said operator. From the residents perspective flexibility and low entry costs are some of the main advantages of *shea-hausu*, with surveys indicating that financial reasons are chief among *shea-hausu* tenants (MLIT, 2013b).

## Conclusions

Following Maalsen's (2020) call to explore new geographies of home in this paper we have considered the case of *shea-hausu* in Tokyo. Complementing much of the research on meanings of home (Lloyd & Vasta, 2017) and sharing (Heath et al., 2017; McNamara & Connell, 2007) that focuses on the perspective of renters, we take the position of housing providers re-inventing a sharing product in a market with little or no demand. We describe three exemplary *share houses* and analyze three sets of techniques that enabled the popularization of sharing as a mode of homemaking among singles in the Tokyo context. We argue that by (1) imagining and shaping the sharer, (2) creating spatial configurations that foster new ideals of home (3) reassembling housing market actors and instruments, providers of *shea hausu* used marketing, design, and organizational change to package and deliver a product that essentially disrupts the Japanese housing market in many different ways.

Through a plethora of textual and visual marketing material the single sharer is actively imagined and the new product is brought within reach of the imagination of potential tenants. Meanwhile, screening processes, and design shape the sharer as a particular type of person. The identity of the single person sharing is carefully carved out, minimizing the importance of personal possessions, (despite their key part in Japanese home culture (Daniels, 2008)), as well as that of friendships and relationships outside the shared house (again, despite their proven importance in the home life of singles (Wilkinson, 2014, Galčanová & Vackova, 2016)). Meanwhile, relationships with people in the house are to be valued and cultivated, while the sharing of everyday utilities, from kitchens and bathrooms to more elaborate amenities, is meant to support the development of these relationships. Though research in western contexts has shown that the potential for conflict is heightened in the context of sharing with strangers home spaces that usually considered private (such as bathrooms) (Heath et al., 2017), these Japanese providers build on nostalgic images of the Japanese home to package and deliver their product.

So, what kind of home is a *shea hausu*? Arguably, a flexible, temporary and experimental one. Temporariness and flexibility are built into contracting schemes that emphasize short notice periods and shorter than customary tenures, marking a trend toward precarious financialized housing markets (Fields, 2017). Flexibility and the experimental nature of the home are supported by membership schemes that see share houses as virtually interchangeable, and meant to accommodate immediate locational needs of the sharer. Short contracts, low entry costs and membership schemes cater to an individualized consumer navigating the market in search of a place to lay their head at night in the best location possible. Meanwhile, the narratives of community and sociability developed by *shea hausu* providers may be appropriating similar tropes used in the promotion of community based and collaborative housing (Mullins & Moore, 2018), but are clearly different. Rather than togetherness (Jarvis, 2017, Heath, this issue) these narratives

seem to describe serendipitous encounters between people that self-select based on common characteristics, such as hobbies, or life goals. Community and sociability are, therefore, promoted by enabling the performance of hobbies and the pursuit of individual life goals in common, in the company of others, *living alone together*. Design features that emphasize comfort, and purposefulness support the process.

Home as provided by *shea-hausu* is a 'ready-to-use' product that requires little active homemaking, challenging customary conceptualization of home-making as a process of appropriation, requiring time and commitment (Valentine, 2001). Furthermore, *shea-hausu* packages housing units, services, and amenities into one product, emphasizing the services over the rather puny housing units in a marketing trick that plays on late-capitalist consumer sensibilities to the possibility of self-actualization and personal improvement through consumption (Zwick & Ozalp, 2011). The role of the individual inhabiting such a home is to sample and experience a particular homemaking style as it was envisioned by designers and architects, rather than contributing to making a place home. Whether that is actually the case, or the product is in fact 'domesticated' (Silverstone, 1993) in the process of being used, and in the home practices of residents was beyond the scope of this project (see also Meagher, 2017).

The advent of *shea hausu* and other commodified sharing formats that have proliferated on the international scene, marks an important moment in the continued commodification and financialization of housing (Aalbers, 2016; Fields, 2018). Developers of co-living often remark on the fact that professionalization has long been lacking in the housing sector, and it is high-time that new technologies, whether digital or more analog, disrupt the sector and provide new products more suited to contemporary consumers. The fact that slick designed websites, and marketing portals are the main interfaces between *shea hausu* providers and potential tenants is no coincidence, since it is the presence of these digitalized intermediaries (Gurran & Maalsen, this issue) as main actors of *shea hausu* provision that distinguishes the tenure and circumscribes its target audience of young, professional singles.

## Note

1. Studio apartments refer here to what is customarily called in Japan 1K apartments, consisting of a room of 16–20m<sup>2</sup> and a narrow kitchen/entrance area.

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